

空ろの箱と 零のマリア

御影瑛路

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March 2.

That was the day my — Kazuki Hoshino's — everyday life got destroyed.
Because of the transfer student "Aya Otonashi."

"I'm Aya Otonashi."

"—Kazuki Hoshino. I'm here to break you."

She treated me with hostility from the first moment.
...But just why is her hostility directed at someone like me?



Kazuki Hoshino

An ordinary high school student. His favorite snack is the Umaibō. One day, he somehow suddenly antagonizes Aya Otonashi — although he hasn't seen her ever before. She threatens to "break" him.



Aya Otonashi

A student that transferred into Hoshino's class almost at the end of the school year. Right after her arrival she announces in front of everyone that she intends to "break" the "culprit" Kazuki.

03/02 — Homeroom

Haruaki Usui

A cheerful but frivolous baseball ace. He often hangs out with Kazuki and Daiya.

Daiya Oomine

An insolent and volatile student who dyes his hair silver and wears three piercings in his right ear. He is also the class president and a shrewd friend of Kazuki's.

Kokone Kirino

A bright and beautiful girl who cares a lot for her friends, but is meddlesome at times. She and Daiya have known each other since childhood.

March 2, morning.

Kokone casually grabs the seat beside me. She starts doing her makeup with the help of her blue hand mirror. She's also making use of a tool that I, as a guy, don't know very well.

"Isn't there something different about me today? Isn't there?"

I don't see any difference. I can't distinguish between how she looked yesterday and how she looks today.

"Kiri. Don't come butting in from over there."

"You never change, huh?"

And then their usual quarrel begins once again. The two of them really are foul-mouthed

03/02 - Before Classes



Kasumi Mogi

A docile, silent and expressionless girl who has won Kazuki's heart. She is the most frequent sacrifice on the morning of March 3rd.

The morning of March 3rd.
At a rainy crossroads with poor visibility.
That's where *it* happens.
No one can prevent it—it definitely happens.

It is the reason that drives me.
The reason for my resistance, for my animosity.
I have decided to avoid giving up, so—

“N-No—!”

03/03 – Morning

We are surrounded by
soft, sweet and pure white
despair.



Designed by Toru Suzuki

It's not like I've completely forgotten about it. I probably still remember this place, and I even dream of its scenery, just as I'm doing now.

I can only remember this place in my dreams.

Right—it's not like I've forgotten about it. I just can't find any clues to help me retrieve these memories. Nothing could possibly trigger my memories of this scene. There's simply nothing in the real world that resembles it at all. If I tried, I could certainly remember it, but I lack the opportunity to do so.

Nothing from my everyday life could possibly remind me of the person before me.

"Do you have a wish?"

The face of the person who calmly asked me that question, was continuously morphing into new and different faces. My dream was generated by my own subconscious, but somehow, I couldn't grasp the features of his (or her) face. I saw it, of course—at least, I believe I did. It's just that he (she) somehow resembled everyone and no one at the same time.

Back then, I guess I gave a passive, harmless answer to his (or her) question, though I don't remember my precise response. Anyhow, when he (she) heard my answer, I was presented with a container of some kind.

"This is a *box* that grants any wish."

It did look like a box, now that he (she) mentioned it.

I squinted at the box. My vision wasn't bad, but I still couldn't see it clearly. There was nothing in the box, yet it exuded a strange feeling. It was like holding a closed cookie box that made a rattling sound when you shook it, but was empty once you opened it.

I think I asked him (or her) something trivial at that point, along the lines of 'Why are you giving this to me?'

"Because you're truly interesting! I can't distinguish one human from another human, even though I'm fascinated by humanity. Ironical, don't you think?"

I didn't really understand what he (she) was trying to say, but I nodded halfheartedly nonetheless.

"But you're an exception—I can distinguish you from the rest of humanity. You might think that this is nothing special, but it's more than enough to capture my interest!"

I looked inside the box. Even though the box was empty, I felt as if I were being attacked by an unpleasant sensation and my entire body were being drawn toward the bottom of the box. I quickly looked away.

"This *box* will grant any wish. I don't care what you wish for—I won't stop you even if your wish destroys all of mankind. I'm just interested in what you, or your species, choose to wish for."

I said something in response, and he (she) smiled.

"Hehe... No, no. It's not some kind of special power. Humans already have the ability to grant wishes just by forming a clear image of what they desire. I'm only able to give that power a little push."

I accepted the box.

Of course, I wouldn't remember this dream when I woke up.

But I would clearly remember what I thought about him (or her). It was the same impression that I had of him (or her) in the dream.

**Somehow, isn't that person—
—disgusting?**



1st time

5242nd time

23rd time

4609th time

1087-6th time

27753rd time
27753rd time

1050th time

2602nd time

2601st time

13118th time

8946th time

1st time

"I am Aya Otonashi. I'm pleased to meet you," says the transfer student with a faint smile.

23rd time

"I'm Aya Otonashi....Regards," says the transfer student, uninterested, emotionlessly.

1,050th time

“Aya Otonashi,” utters the transfer student without even looking at us, seemingly bored beyond belief.

13,118th time

I look at transfer student Aya Otonashi, whose name I don't yet know, standing on the platform.

"Aya Otonashi."

The transfer student murmurs her name to her classmates in a low voice, as if she doesn't care whether we can understand her. Nevertheless, her voice is clear.

—Yeah. I somehow already know her name, even though I've just heard it for the first time.

We all wait with bated breath, but not because of the blunt, simple self-introduction that barely even qualifies as a greeting. It's probably because she is stunningly beautiful. She stands out effortlessly from everyone else in the room.

Everyone waits for her to continue speaking.

She opens her mouth.

"Kazuki Hoshino."

"...Huh?"

She calls out my name for some reason. Everyone else in the class looks at me curiously. Don't look at me like that, I'm just as clueless.

"I'm here to break you," she suddenly proclaims. "This is my 13,118th *school transfer*. Even I can't help but get annoyed after so many iterations. So for a change of pace, I'll declare war this time."

She doesn't even spare a glance for our dumbfounded classmates, and gazes straight at me.

"Kazuki Hoshino. I'll make you surrender. You'd better give me your most precious thing soon. Resistance is futile. Why? That's simple. Because I'll—"

Aya Otonashi smiles, and then finishes her sentence.

"—always be by your side, no matter how much time passes."

10,876th time

It's 'March 2nd'. It's supposed to be 'March 2nd' today.

Why am I confirming today's date?

...Probably because the sky's still cloudy, even though it's already March. That's almost certainly it. I'm a bit melancholic because of the weather; lately, the blue sky has been hiding behind the clouds.

Geez, I wonder when the weather will finally clear up.

I'm in my classroom before school starts, staring out the window, just idly thinking about nothing of import.

I guess I'm having these thoughts because I'm feeling unwell. No, I don't feel bad. I feel how I've always felt. I'm just...uncomfortable. I can't explain it, but it feels like I'm suddenly the only one without a shadow. It's more like the 'something's imperceptibly wrong' kind of uncomfortable.

...Odd. I can't come up with a reason. Nothing unusual happened yesterday, I ate breakfast this morning, I listened to the new album of my favorite artist on the train, and I got an uneventful 'average luck' rating according to the fortune-telling show that I happened to watch.

I decide not to wrack my brain any further thinking about it, and take an Umaibō ^[1] from my bag. Today's Umaibō is pork flavored. I take a bite. No matter how many I eat, I never get tired of that taste.

"Again with the Umaibō—? You really can't get enough of those, can you? If you keep eating Umaibō all the time, your blood will turn Umaibō-colored, you know?"

"...err, what color is that?"

"Who knows!"

The girl kidding around with me is my classmate Kokone Kirino. Her brown hair, somewhere between long and quite long, is bound in a ponytail high up on the back of her head. Kokone changes her hairstyle all the time, but she seems to like her current choice. At least, I think so—I feel like Kokone's recently been sticking with just this style.

Kokone casually grabs the seat beside me. She starts doing her makeup with the help of her blue hand mirror. She's also making use of a tool that I, as a

guy, don't know very well. I wish she'd put this much effort into everything, and not just into doing her makeup.

"Come to think of it, you have a lot of blue stuff, don't you?"

"Oh yeah, I like blue... Ooh, right, Kazu-kun! Isn't there something different about me today? Isn't there?" Kokone suddenly says, looking at me with sparkling eyes.

"Hm...?"

How should I know? There's no way I could respond if you ask me that all of a sudden.

"I'll give you a hint! My charm point has changed!"

"Eh?"

I instinctively look at her breasts.

"Whoa, hey! Why my breasts?!"

Well, because you're always boasting that you finally crossed into D-cup territory, so I was sure...

"Of course my eyes are my charm point! And anyway, breasts don't just suddenly get bigger! Or is that what you'd like?! You closet perv! You titty maniac!"

"...Sorry."

There's no way I could have known about a self-proclaimed charm point like that, but I'll just apologize for now.

"...So?"

Kokone looks expectantly into my eyes. I have to admit her eyes are quite large. I feel a bit bashful as I realize this.

"...I think your face looks the same as always..." I say, not really looking at her face.

"Eh? What? My face looks cute as always, you said?"

"No, I didn't."

"Say it!"

I am being compelled.

"To tell you the truth, I'm using mascara today. How is it? How is it?"

I don't see any difference. I can't distinguish between how she looked yesterday and how she looks today.

".....no, there's really no way I could judge something like that," I tell her in with utter honesty—and fail her test.

"'Something like that' ...you say?!"

She hits me.

"Ow..."

"Tch! What a boring rascal you are!" she says in a forced voice, but...Aah, she might really be a bit angry. Kokone pretends to spit at me and walks off to show off her mascara-covered face to some of our other classmates.

"Haa..."

Now I'm tired. Kokone may be funny, but I can't cope with her temper.

"Done with your lover's quarrel?"

The first thing I see when I turn are three piercings in a right ear. There's only one person in my school with such piercings.

"...Daiya. That was nothing like a lover's quarrel. How the heck did you come to that conclusion?"

My friend Daiya Oomine just sneers at my objection. Yeah, he's arrogant as always. Well, I guess it would be weird if someone like Daiya were to abase himself. After all, he chooses to wear such extreme accessories and doesn't just ignore the school rules, but instead deliberately flaunts his violation of those rules.

"But did you really not notice the mascara? Even I noticed the difference. And I'm absolutely, completely uninterested in her."

"...Seriously?"

They are neighbors and have been childhood friends since kindergarten. That he isn't interested in her is undoubtedly a lie. That being said, overlooking something that even Daiya noticed might be a small problem. After all, he's totally uninterested in others and doesn't even seem to look at people.

"...But, y'know."

I have the feeling that she applied that mascara yesterday as well.

"I see, I got it, Kazu. So you told the bitch 'I'm not interested in you.' I agree with you. I'll adopt the same position. But I'll do it more bluntly."

"You malicious class president! I can hear you quite clearly!"

Daiya ignores the sharp-eared girl and keeps talking.

"Kazu, let's not talk about that irrelevant chick anymore—did you know that a transfer student's arriving today?"

"A transfer student?"

I'll confirm this again—it's 'March 2nd' today. Why would someone transfer in so late in the school year?

"A transfer student?! Really?!"

As expected, Kokone has heard us talking, and raises her voice to ask a question.

"Kiri. I'm not talking to you. Don't come butting in from over there. Oh, and don't come closer, either! That desperately made-up face of yours isn't good for my mental health."

"W-What—?! You're one to talk, Daiya! You should start fixing that dishonest personality of yours ASAP. Maybe we should hang you upside-down for 24 hours so some blood can finally get to your brain! Maybe you'll finally be able to say something of value after that."

In order to interrupt their mutual abuse-fest, I raise my voice a bit and return to the original topic.

"A transfer student, right? I think I heard something about that."

Daiya closes his mouth on cue and glares at me.

"...Who told you that?" he asks with a serious look.

"Eh? Why do you want to know?"

"Don't answer a question with a question."

"Err...who was it again? Weren't you the one who told me?"

"Impossible. I only heard about it just now when I went to the staff room. There shouldn't have been an opportunity for you to find out."

"Really?"

"This kind of rumor immediately spreads everywhere. But apparently even this babbler, Kiri, didn't know about it."

Daiya's probably right, considering Kiri's reaction just now. And not just her; no one in first year class 1-6 seems to have known.

"That's why I concluded that the information was kept secret until today, the day of the transfer. But if so, how did you find out?"

"...Err?"

I wonder.

"Well, whatever. But isn't it weird, Kazu? Why would someone transfer in at this point in the school year? There are probably special circumstances involved. For example, could she be some company chairman's problem child who was expelled from a bunch of other schools? If that were the case, it'd make sense that the information was hidden."

"Daiya, it's not good to be speculating about the transfer student like that; it's just prejudice on your part. I mean, that student's already in a difficult situation even without your 'help.' Also, everyone's listening on the sly."

The rest of the students, who have indeed been surreptitiously listening to our conversation, smile awkwardly.

"Ah? Why should I care?"

Uwaa...

The moment I let out a sigh at Daiya's high-handed attitude, the bell rings. My classmates scurry back to their seats.

Kokone, who sits next to the window, opens it and leans out. Apparently she wants to see the transfer student as soon as possible.

"Ooh!"

She raises her voice—she's probably spotted someone who looks like the transfer student. After letting out that "Ooh," Kokone then sits back in her seat with a frozen expression, even though she was so cheerful just moments ago before she looked out the window.

I wonder what's wrong.

Kokone smiles and murmurs 'this is amazing!' Everyone probably wants to know what's up, but our homeroom teacher enters the room at this point. The silhouette of a girl can be seen behind the cloudy glass of the classroom door. It has to be the transfer student. After looking around the classroom, the teacher realizes that everyone is wondering about the person behind the door, and quickly calls her in.

The silhouette behind the cloudy glass moves.

And then I see—her.

In an instant—

The scenery changes at once, as if I had been pushed off a cliff.

First, I hear a sound. The sound of the scenery being ripped away. Forcefully, violently, one image after another is thrust into my mind. Over

and over, similar bits of scenery appear. I feel as if my consciousness is about to be blown away, but it's then pulled back and firmly fixed in place, as if it were forcibly crammed into a little metallic box. Déjà vu. Déjà vu.

"I am Aya Otonashi." I heard you.

"I'm Aya Otonashi." I heard you.

"I'm Aya Otonashi." Enough, I heard you already!

I reject the massive amount of information that's trying to pierce my consciousness. I mean, there's no way all this could fit. My brain would overload. I can't process it all.

"Ah..."

What,

What incomprehensible things—am I...?

I realize that my thoughts are becoming completely jumbled, and forcibly shut down my brain—and then I return.

Eh? What was I just thinking about?

Having lost my train of thought, I face the front of the room and look at her again. I look at the transfer student, Aya Otonashi, whose name I don't know yet.

"Aya Otonashi."

The transfer student murmurs her name in a low voice, as if she doesn't care whether we can understand her.

Aya Otonashi steps off the platform.

Her extremely simple self-introduction spawns a rush of chatter in the classroom.

She doesn't care one bit about her bewildered classmates, and starts walking.

Towards me.

Looking directly at my face.

She sits down naturally in the empty seat beside mine, almost as if this seat had been prepared for her from the start.

Otonashi-san scowls at me suspiciously as I watch her silently, like a deer caught in headlights.

...I guess I should say something.

".....Err, I'm pleased to meet you."

Her frown, however, does not change one bit.

"That's all?"

"Eh...?"

"I asked if that was all."

Was there something else to say? Even if you say so, I can't think of anything. After all, this is the first time we've met.

But the atmosphere forces me to say something.

".....Err, your uniform. Is that uniform from your previous school?"

Otonashi-san does not react to my frantic words in any way and just keeps staring at me.

"...Eh, well?"

Seeing my confusion, Otonashi-san lets out a sigh for some reason and smiles. Her smile seems to demonstrate amazement at a shallow-witted child.

"I'll tell you something good, Hoshino."

...Eh? I didn't tell her my name yet.

But that thought is a mere trifle. Otonashi-san says something to me that makes me sit completely still for a full five seconds.

"Kasumi Mogi is wearing light blue panties today."



Kasumi Mogi's basic attire during P.E. is her regular uniform rather than a gym outfit.

Today, she is once again watching the boys play soccer. She's wearing her uniform like normal while remaining as expressionless as an ornament.

The white legs that peek out from Mogi-san's skirt are so thin, they seem as if they could snap at any moment.

And I, for some reason, am sleeping with my head on her lap.

Ah, yeah. I don't have a clue anymore about what's going on, either. While I'm certainly feeling a sensation of bliss, I can't really enjoy it since I'm desperately trying to stop my nosebleed with a tissue. Things wouldn't go well if I failed.

By the way, I can remember how I ended up this way. Because Otonashi-san's actions had left me all confused, I let a soccer ball hit me right in the face during gym class and got a nosebleed. Mogi-san was worried about me and for some reason, let me rest my head on her lap.

Mogi-san's legs aren't soft at all; to be honest, lying on them actually hurts my head a bit.

I wonder why she cares for me that way. I look up at Mogi-san, but her expressionless face tells me nothing.

But I am happy.

Very, very happy.

Otonashi-san's comment about 'panties'.

Of course it surprised me, and not just due to its abruptness and lack of context. What I mean is, Otonashi-san said 'I'll tell you something good.' Basically, she declared that information about 'Kasumi Mogi' was 'something good' for me.

I haven't even told Kokone or Daiya about my crush on Kasumi Mogi. So there is no way Otonashi-san, who I met for the first time today, could know about it. Nevertheless, she still said what she said.

"...Say, Mogi-san."

"What is it?"

Mogi-san answers quietly. Her voice is like that of a little bird's, which dovetails nicely with her small body and delicate appearance.

"Today, um, did Otonashi-san talk to you?"

"...The transfer student? ...No."

"You two aren't otherwise acquainted, right?"

Mogi-san nods.

"Did she do something suspicious to you?"

She thinks for a moment and then shakes her head. Her slightly wavy hair sways.

"Why are you asking about this...?" she asks and inclines her head.

"Ah, no...if nothing happened, that's fine."

I shift my sight to the field. Otonashi-san stands alone in the center of the schoolyard with a daunting pose, showing no interest in the ball or the girls

swarming after it. When the ball rolls casually toward her, she weakly kicks it back....Err, did she just kick it to a girl on the other team?

"Mmhh."

I might have been reading too much into what she said, thinking that Otonashi-san noticed my feelings for Mogi-san.

Otonashi-san had quite an impact on me because of her appearance and attitude. Yeah, I merely read too much into her comment because it was made so abruptly by a person with remarkable presence. That's logic anyone could agree with.

And yet—why can't I believe that?

Otonashi-san fixes her gaze on me, not looking away for a moment.

Staring straight into my eyes, she boldly lifts the corner of her mouth. Although class has not yet ended, she starts walking toward me.

Before I know it, I stand up. I've abandoned the privilege of sleeping on Mogi-san's lap, which is supposed to be the source of my utmost happiness. My entire body shudders. It's not hyperbole—I really am shuddering from head to toe.

Mogi-san, who seems to have noticed Otonashi-san as well, tenses up anxiously and stands up next to me.

With a daring smile, Otonashi-san points at me...no, at Mogi-san.

Just then.

There's a sudden gust of wind—a completely random gust. A gust no one could possibly have foreseen.

This sudden gust lifts Mogi-san's skirt.

"~~~!!"

Mogi-san immediately pushes her skirt down, but only in front. I am standing behind her. Right after the gust passes, Mogi-san turns around and looks at me. She is indeed expressionless as always, but her cheeks seem a little red.

She silently forms the words "did you see them?" with her mouth. Actually, she might actually have spoken out loud, but I can't hear her low voice. I shake my head frantically. I guess that my frantic reaction clearly indicates that I've indeed seen her panties. But Mogi-san doesn't respond and instead casts her eyes downward.

By this point, Otonashi-san is standing right next to me.

I get a glimpse of her expression.

"Aah—"

I realize why I am trembling so hard—I understood Otonashi-san's expression. It reflects a feeling that has never in my life been aimed at me until now.

—Hostility.

Why? Why is there hostility directed at someone like me?

Otonashi-san raises the corner of her mouth and scowls at me. While I am still shaking but otherwise paralyzed, she places her hand on my shoulder and puts her lips to my ear.

"They were light blue, weren't they?"

Otonashi-san knows everything. My affection towards Mogi-san, that a sudden gust would expose her panties, she knew it all.

Otonashi-san's statement this morning wasn't some kind of joke. It was a—threat to insinuate that she knows me perfectly, that she has grasped my way of thinking, that she's in control of me.

"Hoshino, you should have recalled it by now, right?"

Otonashi-san observes me while I stand petrified. We stay like this for a few moments, but when I stay silent, she lets out a sigh and drops her gaze to the ground.

She murmurs her complaint: "So it's useless, even though I went this far...I see, you're even one level duller today."

"If you've forgotten, remember it now. My name's 'Maria.'"

...'Maria'? No, err...you're 'Aya Otonashi', aren't you?

"...I-Is that your pen name or something?"

"Shut up."

She scowls at me, not even trying to hide her irritation.

"Well then. You aren't challenging at all like this, but in that case I'll act at my own convenience," Otonashi-san says and turns her back to me.

"Ah, wait..."

I instinctively stop her. She turns around, appearing stressed out. I can't help but wince at the sight of her frown.

I'm not sure. But judging from Otonashi-san's attitude, maybe—

"Could it be that we've met in the past?"

Hearing these words, Otonashi-san raises the corner of her mouth.

"Yeah, we were lovers in our previous life. Oh mine beloved Hathaway, how miserable thy current state! Thou wert not so lily-livered when thou cameth to save me, princess of thine enemy's land."

".....Umm, what?"

I am at a loss for words. Otonashi-san seems satisfied after seeing my confused state. For the first time today, she displays what seems like a genuine smile.

"I'm joking."



The next day.

I saw Aya Otonashi's corpse.

8,946th time

Upon hearing my words, Mogi-san's eyes turn sad and she ponders for a while. With an uncomfortable look on her face, she then mutters:

“Please wait until tomorrow.”

2,601st time

"I'm Aya Otonashi."

The transfer student murmurs only these words, and nothing more.



"Oh my god! That's intense!"

My friend Haruaki Usui, who is sitting next to me, says so in a rather loud voice. He does so even though class is still in session, and vigorously slaps my back.

Haruaki? You know, that really hurts, and the looks that our classmates are giving us are also quite embarrassing...

Haruaki's gaze is already turned toward the back of the room, where the transfer student, Aya Otonashi, is sitting.

"Our eyes met! That's intense!"

"Well, when you turn around to look at her, then it's only natural that your eyes meet."

"Hoshii, it's DESTINY!"

Wait, what? Destiny?

"Anyway, she's just too pretty! She would definitely pass muster as a work of art on the world market...and then be acknowledged as a national treasure. Oh, it's too late for me, my heart has already been stolen...I'll go confess to her."

That's fast!!

The bell rings. After we stand up and bow to our teacher, Haruaki makes a beeline for Otonashi-san without bothering to sit down first.

"Aya Otonashi-san! I fell for you at first sight. I love you!"

Uwaa, he's seriously doing it...

I cannot hear Otonashi-san's reply but Haruaki's face is a dead giveaway. Ah, no...it's not even necessary to look at his face.

Haruaki comes back and stands in front of my desk.

"Absurd...*I* got dumped?"

He thought his confession could succeed...? It's scary because he actually seems serious.

"Isn't that obvious? Confessing to her out of nowhere will only annoy her!"

"Mh, I see your point. Well then, I shall confess again. But next time, I won't do it so suddenly! My feelings are bound to get through to her one day!"

On the one hand his positive way of thinking is almost enviable, but on the other hand, I'd rather just avoid it entirely.

"Having fun? You're providing me some pretty good entertainment, but the girls are giving you guys some serious looks of disdain."

Daiya joins us with these words.

"Eeh?! Isn't it only Haruaki who's getting looked down on?!"

"Nope, you are, too. The girls regard you as birds of a feather."

"Oho, flocking together with me as the same kind of bird? What an honor! Don't you think so, Hoshii?"

A-Anything but...

"Leaving that aside, Daiyan, even you'd want to make a move on her, right?"

Haruaki elbows Daiya. He's able to do that to Daiya without fear, probably because they are childhood friends. Or maybe it's just because he acts impulsively without any concern for consequences...

Daiya sighs and answers right away.

"Not at all."

"That's impossible! In that case, Daiyan, who could possibly move your heart?"

"It doesn't matter whether my heart beats faster because of Otonashi-san's looks. I may have to acknowledge her beauty, but I still have no desire to make a move."

"Huuuh...?"

"Haruaki, you have zero understanding, don't you? Well, of course such feelings can't be understood by a monkey like you, who lives by following his instincts and would take any girl as long as she's got a pretty face."

"What!? To begin with, what does instinct have to do with caring about appearances?!"

"It's human instinct to be attracted to someone beautiful because a beautiful child will increase the chances that your bloodline will survive."

"Ooh", "Ooh" Haruaki and I let out simultaneous breaths of admiration. Daiya looks amazed, as if he were shocked that we didn't know something so basic.

"Ah, I got it, Daiyan! So you're saying that her beauty is so far beyond our reach that even you can't make a move on her! Inevitable defeat! That's it, right? Like that fox who made himself think that 'this grape is sour' when he couldn't reach it. Your behavior is called rationalization. How uncool! That's so uncool, Daiyan!"

"How much of my talk did you listen to? What the hell?...well, the first half of your statement wasn't necessarily wrong. But as for the other half of your speech—I'll kill you!"

"Oho, so you really can't make a move on her."

Haruaki has a triumphant look on his face. Daiya finally punches Haruaki. Uwaa, it looks like all of Daiya's frustration went straight into his punch ...

"It's not 'I can't make a move on her.' It's 'she won't make a move on me.'"

"How cocky...hey, Hoshii, isn't that guy getting carried away just because of his looks?" Haruaki says without showing any sign of remorse.

"It's not that she won't make a move because I'm out of reach! Well, that could be possible as well, but in her case that doesn't even apply."

"Uwaa, he's boldly saying strange things."

"She doesn't regard me as outside her reach, no, she doesn't even engage in such a classification. She's not interested in us to start with. She's not even looking down on us. Just as we only register bugs as bugs, she registers people as people. That's all. She doesn't care about slight differences among people like my pretty face or Haruaki's ugly face. Just like the gender of cockroaches doesn't even cross your consciousness. How can you possibly make a move on such a girl?"

Even Haruaki seems overwhelmed by this merciless statement about Otonashi-san, and stays dead silent.

"...Daiya."

I open my mouth in Haruaki's place.

"Looks like you're surprisingly interested in Otonashi-san."

Daiya is at a loss for words. Ah, that's an extremely rare reaction. But aren't I right? Setting aside whether his opinion is correct, he must have observed her a decent amount in order to perform such an analysis.

"...tch, I have no interest!"

"Oh, you blushed!"

"...hey Kazu. You're going to step on a land mine if you keep going down that road. Do you want me to show you a way to use a leek that you can barely imagine? You'll end up with such a bad case of PTSD that the mere sight of leeks will cause you to break out in hives! "[1]

I realize that Daiya is quite angry, so I try to change the subject by laughing awkwardly.

Anyhow, Daiya seems to understand that he and Otonashi-san are totally incompatible.

"Despite your crap sense of intuition that's on par with that of an insect, even you'll soon become aware of her abnormality."

It sounded a bit like a bad excuse.

But it really wasn't.

You know, he was totally right.



Right after homeroom has ended, Otonashi-san suddenly raises her hand. Our teacher, Hokubo-sensei, notices her, but Otonashi-san doesn't even care if he acknowledges her or not. She stands up and starts speaking before he even assents.

"I'm going to have everyone in class 1-6 do something right now."

Otonashi-san ignores our dumbfounded response, and continues.

"It will take five minutes. You can spare that much time, right?"

Nobody replies, but she heads for the platform anyway. She nonchalantly ushers Hokubo-sensei out of the classroom, and then takes his place at the platform. Although this is definitely an abnormal situation, she somehow makes it seem totally natural. Judging by the my classmates' reactions, they feel the same way.

It's dead silent in the classroom.

While standing on the platform, Otonashi-san speaks as she gazes straight ahead.

"You will now write 'a certain thing' for me."

Otonashi-san steps down from the platform and hands some papers to the students in the front row. Those students each take one sheet and pass the rest on to the students behind them; it's just like they normally do with handouts that need to be distributed to the entire class.

I finally receive a copy. It is an ordinary, plain sheet of recycled paper that's about 10cm long on each side.

"When you're done, please hand it back to me."

"So what's that 'certain thing'?"

After Kokone asks the question that's buzzing through everyone's head, Otonashi-san responds plainly:

"My name."

With this comment, the previously silent classroom starts to get noisy. Fair enough, I don't get it either. Her name? Everyone knows her name. She just introduced herself as "Aya Otonashi" this morning after all.

"How idiotic!" someone exclaims. There is only one person who could possibly say such a thing to Otonashi-san.

Daiya Oomine.

My classmates all hold their breath. Everyone knows that Daiya would make a terrible enemy.

"Your name's Aya Otonashi. Why do you want us to write that down? Do you want us to memorize your name that badly?"

Otonashi-san stays composed despite Daiya's aggressive speech.

"I would write 'Aya Otonashi'. But I just told you that. So there's no need for me to write it anymore, right?"

"Yeah, I don't care."

Apparently he didn't expect such a simple affirmation and is left bereft of speech.

He clicks his tongue, tears up the paper as noisily as possible and leaves the classroom.

"What's wrong? Why won't you start writing?"

No one was able to start writing. It may not be obvious, but everyone is surprised and overwhelmed by her and her behavior. She just talked back to Daiya. As Daiya's classmates, we know just how impressive that is.

Everyone stays frozen for a while. But once the scratching sound of someone's pencil breaks the silence, the sound of scribbling starts to echo across the classroom.

I bet no one understands Otonashi-san's intentions. But it doesn't matter. In the end, there is only one thing we can write, after all.

There's only the name 'Aya Otonashi'.

The first person to deliver his paper to Otonashi-san is Haruaki. Once he stands up, several classmates follow suit. Otonashi-san's expression doesn't really change when she accepts Haruaki's paper.

It was probably...the wrong answer.

"Haruaki."

I call out to him as he returns to his seat after exchanging a word or two with Mogi-san.

"What's wrong, Hoshii?"

"What did you write?"

"Mh? Well, you can only write 'Aya Otonashi', right? I almost forgot to write the last letter, though," Haruaki says while seeming a bit disconsolate for some reason.

"...well yeah, I guess that's the only choice..."

"Don't vacillate so much—just write it down!"

"Do you really think she went through all that just to make us write down her name?"

If that were the case, I can't understand why she bothered.

Haruaki immediately answers with "Of course not," confirming my doubts.

"Eh? But...you wrote 'Aya Otonashi', didn't you?"

"Yeah....listen, Daiyan is so intelligent it's not even funny, right? Well, on the other hand, his personality is so bad it's not funny, either."

Because he suddenly changed the topic, I incline my head.

"And he said he would simply write 'Aya Otonashi'. So he couldn't think of anything else to write. Of course I'd do no better. What I'm trying to say is,

well, we can't come up with an alternative, so we can't write anything else, either."

"If you can't think of something...you can't write it down."

"Exactly. In other words, this exercise wasn't directed at us."

I get the feeling that Haruaki just hit the bull's eye. He must be right.

In other words, Otonashi-san doesn't care about most of her classmates and is only doing this for the person who *can* actually think of something else.

I understand why Haruaki seemed so depressed just now. I mean, he fell for her at first sight. His confession might have been half in jest, but I don't know of anyone else he's confessed to. So he was actually more or less sincere.

But she didn't return his affections. His existence was being ignored...just like Daiya said.

"...Haruaki, you're surprisingly bright."

"The 'surprisingly' is unnecessary!"

While I try to hide my rude comment behind a bashful smile, Haruaki reacts by smiling bitterly.

"See you later. If I don't leave now, I'll get killed by my seniors. No, I'm not exaggerating!"

"Ah, yeah. Go for it."

Our so-so baseball team seems to be pretty demanding.

I look down at my blank sheet of paper. I am about to write 'Aya Otonashi', but just can't do it.

I gaze at Otonashi-san. Her expression doesn't change in the slightest as she looks through the papers that were handed to her. I guess 'Aya Otonashi' is written on every single one.

—someone who can't think of anything can't write anything.

"——"

Then what am I supposed to do?

After all that, I do manage to think of something. For some reason, the absurd name 'Maria' comes to mind.

I'm aware that something's wrong with me. 'Maria' of all things. I have no idea where this name came from. If I hand my paper to her with this name, she will just roar something at me, like 'You've gotta be kidding me!'

But what if this is, by chance, the answer she's wishing for...?

After some severe equivocation, I start writing on the piece of 10cm by 10cm recycled paper.

'Maria'

I stand up and head over to Otonashi-san. There isn't a line anymore. Looks like I am the last person left. I nervously hand her my paper. Otonashi-san accepts it wordlessly.

Then she looks at what's written there.

And her expression changes. Massively.

"...eh?"

Otonashi-san's eyes are wide open, even though she didn't show the slightest stirrings of unease when facing off against our teacher and Daiya?

"Fufufu..."

She suddenly bursts into laughter.

"Hoshino."

"Oh, you remembered my name."

I instantly regret saying that. Because, when she stops laughing, she scowls at me as if I were her arch-enemy.

"...You...! Are you freaking kidding me?!?"

She seems to have frantically suppressed her anger, since she only manages to speak in a low, chesty voice. I expected the 'kidding' part, but the tone of her voice is rather surprising.

She seizes me by the collar with all her strength.

"Wa! I-I'm sorry! I-It's not like I was messing with you..."

"So you're telling me that you can write such an answer without it being some kind of joke?"

"...err, well. You...might be right. I might have been kidding around."

This may have been the finishing blow.

Without ever letting go of my collar, she drags me in her wake, all the way to the back of the school building.



"Hoshino. Are you making fun of me?"

Otonashi-san shoves me against the wall of the school building and glares at me.

"I'm not that good at coming up with plans. I'm aware of that. So I came up with an insane plan that's on the level of saying 'Culprit, turn yourself in!' No, you can't even call it a plan. And yet...Why the heck are you taking the bait!? And this is already the second time I've done this! The first time you completely ignored it!"

She removes her hand from my collar, but the pressure of her furious gaze is more than enough to hold me in place.

Otonashi-san continues to glare at me while chewing on her lips, and then sighs.

"...no, I lost my composure because I finally got a response by using such a ridiculous method. But that means the situation is definitely improving, so I guess I should actually be happy."

"...yeah, I guess. You should be happy! Hahaha."

Otonashi-san scowls again at my forced smile. I should probably just stay silent.

"...I don't get it. Actually, I was thinking you might have been defeated by my persistence...but what's with this ignorant, relaxed face of yours!"

I'm not ignorant, I have no clue what you're talking about!

"You kept ignoring me for 2,600 iterations. I refuse to surrender, however many times this endless recurrence shall continue. However, I still feel fatigue. You should feel the same, so how can you maintain such composure?!"

What should I...I have no idea what you're talking about.

Apparently she finally notices my bewilderment and looks at me suspiciously.

".....are you perhaps not self-aware?"

"Self-aware? Of what?"

"...very well. Whether you're acting or not, an explanation shouldn't do much harm. Hm, right. To put it simply—I've already 'transferred' 2,601 times."

All I can do is be blankly amazed.

"If you're just acting then you're quite amazing. But if you really 'didn't know', it'd certainly be natural for you to have such a dull look. Whatever. I'll explain what I know. Mh, right—today's March 2nd, right?"

I nodded.

"It would be easier to say that I've repeated this March 2nd 2,601 times, but that isn't quite right. For that reason I use the expression *school transfer*, although that's not really appropriate either."

"Haa..."

"I've been sent back to March 2nd, 6:27 A.M. 2,601 times."

"....."

"'Sent back' is the correct expression from my own perspective, but it's not universally correct. So I'm using the expression *school transfer* here, since it's closer to what actually happens—"

Otonashi-san sees that my jaw has dropped and scratches her head.

"Aah, geez! Just how dumb are you! If there's anything you disapprove of around 06:27 A.M., you simply declare it 'void', don't you!" She shouts at me, practically boiling over inside. No, no...no one in my position would be able to follow her line of reasoning, right?

"...I don't really understand, but you've been repeating the same day over and over?"

It happens at the very instant I say that.

"Ah—"

What? What's this?

I press my chest, where an intense, strange sensation is attacking me. I feel uneasy...no, 'uneasy' is an understatement. It's a deeply eerie sensation, as if your hometown were suddenly replaced by a totally different town and you're the only person who noticed.

It's not like my memories have returned. I haven't recalled anything new.

But for some reason I can feel that something *was* there.

Otonashi-san is telling the truth.

Just the bare truth.

"Do you finally understand?"

"...w-wait a sec."

She's experienced March 2nd 2,601 times. That alone would be more than enough to throw me off my stride, but basically Otonashi-san is stating:

"...I am responsible for this?"

"Yeah," Otonashi-san answers on the spot.

"W-Why would I do that?"

"How could I possibly understand your motives."

"I'm not the one doing this!"

"How can you say that when you're not even self-aware?"

I was about to say, 'Why me?' but I realize there's only one thing that made me stand out.

I wrote 'Maria' on that sheet of paper.

"Just as you were unaware of these recurrences until now, other people who were dragged into this situation have no means to remember the iterations that were rendered 'void.' In other words: besides me, only the culprit should be able to write down the name 'Maria', which I've only mentioned in previous iterations."

But I remembered this name. I have to admit that it's unthinkable for a name like 'Maria' to spontaneously pop up in my head.

"I don't know whether it's effective, but I always try to behave so that I stand out in the memories of everyone else. I've been waiting for the culprit, who must also remember the past iterations that were rendered 'void', to make a mistake. Well, I wasn't really expecting much from this strategy..."

"...when did you start suspecting me? I mean, you specifically mentioned this name-'Maria'-to me in a previous iteration, right?"

"Actually, you seemed basically harmless, so I didn't specifically suspect you."

"So...?"

"Hmph, of course I tested each person one at a time by mentioning this name. After all, my time is basically unlimited."

Her time is unlimited.

The time Otonashi-san has spent. A length of time so great, "unlimited" can't even be called a figure of speech anymore.

I understand. Her time is basically unlimited, so that's why she came up with this random plan of making the class write down her name—in the slight hope that someone would write 'Maria'. Even if she didn't have any

real chance of success. All her best plans had been exhausted long before the 2,601st *school transfer*, so it was probably just a way to kill time until she came up with a new plan. In order to stay sane, trying a nearly hopeless plan is still better than doing nothing at all. After all, the time she spends within these 'School Transfers' could possibly last forever.

That's why Otonashi-san got so angry when I fell for this trick. It's like when no matter how hard you try, you can't beat an enemy in an RPG and thus train and level up desperately—but in actuality, you could have easily beaten him just by using a certain easily obtained item. You reached your goal in the end, but you desperately resent wasting all that time and effort.

"Well, let's cut short this idle chatter. After all, nothing's been resolved."

"Is that so?"

"Of course. Or does the situation seem settled to you? Does this consecutive nightmare, the Rejecting Classroom, look like it has ended to you?"

The Rejecting Classroom? I guess that's what she calls her repeating hell.

At any rate, there is just one point that still bugs me.

"You know, I can understand why you treat me as the culprit because I've written 'Maria'. But listen, to begin with, why are you not affected by this Rejecting Classroom?"

"It's not like I'm unaffected; actually, I'm just as affected by the Rejecting Classroom as anyone else. If I surrendered and stopped trying to preserve my memories, the 'Classroom' would capture me right away. I would live meaninglessly within this endless recurrence. Giving in would be as easy as spilling a cup of water that you're precariously balancing on top of your head. We would forever continue experiencing this one day that you're rejecting."

"All that would happen if you just forgot?"

"Think about it. Is there any other person who could possibly notice this recurrence? After all, even you weren't aware of the recurrence, and you're the one who set it up..."

...she might be right. After all, she already has repeated 2,601 iterations.

"It would be infinitely easier for me to abandon my efforts to remember. But that will absolutely never happen."

"...never?"

"Yeah, never. It's not possible that I give up. I don't care if have to repeat this day 2,000 times, 20,000 times or a bajillion times, I will overcome this recurrence and achieve my goal."

2,000 times. We often come across '2,000' as a unit in our daily lives. But if we have to really pile it up piece by piece...for example, there are 365 days in a year, 1,825 days equals five years...and that still wouldn't be enough yet to hit 2,000 days.

Otonashi-san has already spent more time than that in the Rejecting Classroom.

"Hoshino. Are you also unaware of why you created this Rejecting Classroom?"

"Eh?...yeah."

"Fufu, I see. Assuming that you're playing dumb just to dodge this question, there's certainly some meaning behind all this. If so, your acting is quite solid."

"I-I'm not acting!"

"Well, then I'll ask you—"

Otonashi-san smiles faintly.

"Hoshino, you have met—him, haven't you?"

—who?

...Is not the question I ask myself right now, for whatever reason. Who have I met? I don't know. I can't remember.

Still, I understand.

I have met '*'.

When? Where? Of course I couldn't know such a thing. That isn't part of my memories. Even so, I can feel that we've met.

I try to remember. But the information is blocked off, as if by a shutter coming down at extreme speed. Attention! You may not enter. Authorized personnel only.

"Fufu, so you met him," she chuckles.

Otonashi-san is now convinced. And I am convinced as well.

I, Kazuki Hoshino, am the person responsible for this situation.

"He should have handed it over to you. The *box* that grants you a single *wish*."

She suddenly uses the word box. Based on what she's said thus far, that box seems to be the tool that produced this Rejecting Classroom.

"Ah, I didn't tell you my goal yet," Otonashi-san tells me while chuckling.

"My goal is—to obtain the box."

Then her laughter disappears without a trace. Otonashi-san, who is convinced that I own the box, scowls at me coldly and issues a command:

"Now hand over the box."

I definitely have the box. There's no alternative, right?

But is it really alright to hand over this box that grants any wish to her?

I mean, Otonashi-san has endured 2,601 repetitions just for the sake of obtaining this box. So she has a wish that justifies such an enormous effort. She wants to grant her own wish; even if it means making light of my wish by stealing my box.

—She is driven by a determination that borders on abnormality.

Right, that's abnormal. Aya Otonashi is abnormal.

"...I don't know how."

I'm not lying. But I'm also trying to show some resistance.

"I see. So you'll hand it over to me once you figure out how to do it?"

"Well..."

"Forgetting how to give it up is common. But you haven't forgotten permanently; somewhere, deep down, you still know how to do it. Just like you never forget how to ride a bicycle: you may not be able to teach other people to ride it, but you still instinctively understand how to do it. You're just bewildered because you can't convert that understanding into words."

"...is there no way to end the Rejecting Classroom without removing the box?"

Otonashi-san shoots a cold glance at me.

"So you don't plan to hand it over to me. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I-It's not like that..."

Sensing my obvious panic, Otonashi-san lets out a quiet sigh.

"Let's see. I guess the Rejecting Classroom would also end if we crushed the box along with its *owner*."

"Crush it along with its owner...?"

'Owner' probably refers to the culprit holding the box—in other words, me. Crush it along with me? In short—

Otonashi-san represses her feelings and says coldly: "The Rejecting Classroom will end if you die."



Is this reason enough to prepare a '*****'?

Are you telling me that you plan to do this to me as well if necessary? In that case, please do it quickly; that'd be easier to bear.

The morning of March 3rd. At a rainy crossroads with poor visibility.

I have thrown aside my umbrella and look at the '*****'. Nothing else really registers. The truck that has crashed into the wall and Otonashi-san, who is just standing there, neither is being processed by my brain. A red liquid is flowing continuously; there's so much of it that the rain can't even wash it away.

A cor***, missing half of its head, whose bra** have splashed everywhere.

***pse. Corpse. Corpse. CORpse. CorpseCorpseCORPSE. corPSE.

CorpsecorpseCORPSE. Corpse. Corpse. Corpse!

Haruaki's 'Corpse'.

"—ah"

Once I finally recognize the thing before my eyes, I start to vomit.

I look at Aya Otonashi. She is staring expressionlessly at me.

".....Haruaki"

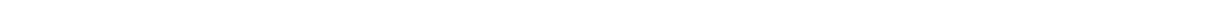
But don't worry, Haruaki!

You know, this will be undone anyway.

This will be conveniently declared 'void'.

.....Oh? Could it be...

Could this be the reason I wished for the Rejecting Classroom...? Because I'm rejecting a situation like this?



2,602nd time

"I'm Aya Otonashi."

"—ah"

Right at that instant, a crimson image flashes through my mind. It's an image that has been buried in the depths of my memories, although I saw it for a moment just now.

And as if my brain were connected to that image by a thread, the rest of my recollections of the 2,601st *school transfer* are also drawn into my consciousness.

I have to praise myself for not screaming out loud.

"Mh? What's wrong Hoshii? You look really ill, are you ok?"

Haruaki, who is sitting beside me, is worried about me.

Haruaki, who should have been run over by a truck, smiles at me.

An inevitable unease. Nausea. A giant flood of information completely overwhelms me, as if I am its prey and just got totally consumed. My mind can't keep up with the information overload and gets severely stressed.

Last iteration's memories just got connected with my current memories.

The connection is so lively and clear—

"But really, Aya-chan is too cute. I'll confess my love to her."

—because of Haruaki's corpse.

And now he falls in love at first sight with Aya Otonashi once more, although she made him suffer so horribly.

I look at Otonashi-san and our eyes meet. She is glaring at me. With a daring grin, she is glaring at me.

...was making him into a corpse supposed to coerce me into handing over my *box*?

If so, her plan is way too effective. Threatening me by showing me a corpse, implying that "I'll kill you"...And by using the corpse of my friend, she also corners me with guilt. I realize that in theory none of this is my fault; it's all Otonashi-san's doing. But confronted by an actual corpse, theory gets blown away and instinct takes over—my spirit is easily broken.

If I could, I would give her the box right away. But fortunately, I just don't know how.

...fortunately? That's not right. I mean, since this attack is so effective, Otonashi-san will definitely continue.

Until she breaks my spirit.

Otonashi-san descends from the platform and approaches me.

She stands right beside me.

Staring straight ahead without looking at me, she murmurs:

"Looks like you remember."



If things continue like this I'm going to break.

I played dumb and ran away from Otonashi-san, even though I know it's useless.

I somehow have to come up with a counter-measure while avoiding her.

That's why—

"Have you told me everything, Kazu?"

—I consulted the most intelligent person I know, Daiya Oomine.

Daiya leans against the corridor wall and is obviously in a bad mood—probably because my explanation used up the entire break between first and second period.

"So? What do you want from me after telling me about this novel idea?"

I bluntly unloaded the entire story, including the stuff I learned from Otonashi-san, without omitting a single detail. Still, it is what it is—I didn't expect a realist like Daiya to believe my tale, so I turned it into the scenario of a novel.

"I was wondering what the protagonist of this story should do."

"If we think broadly about his options, he's probably supposed to oppose that 'transfer student.'"

Naturally, I'm the *protagonist* and Otonashi-san is the *transfer student* in this scenario.

Since I adopted the story as is, Daiya noticed that the transfer student is 'Aya Otonashi'. But he just smiled wryly and said, "so she was the model." He appears confident that our discussion is purely hypothetical.

"But...I don't think the protagonist can compete against the transfer student."

"I guess that's true at the present time."

The opponent is Aya Otonashi. A person that goes so far as to *transfer* 2,602 times and even produces corpses in order to obtain the box. I don't think that I have any chance of beating her.

"But it's possible for the protagonist to obtain power at a later point that matches the transfer student's," Daiya says carelessly.

"Eh—?"

Of course I consulted with Daiya in order to find a solution. But I did so with low expectations, like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Honestly, I didn't expect that he would come up with anything.

"What's with that reaction? Well then, tell me, what makes the transfer student superior to the protagonist?"

"Eh? Well—"

"Aah, no, you'd better not answer. You'd just piss me off with some totally stupid answer."

...I'm allowed to get angry, right?

"The difference between the protagonist and the transfer student is a difference of information. The transfer student can use this difference to manipulate the protagonist like a puppet. It's simple. All she needs to do is control the flow of information and only give the protagonist info that helps her out."

That's...right. Otonashi-san can toy with me at her leisure as soon as I forget about what's going on.

"On the other hand, if he narrows the gap between their levels of information—the main reason he can't compete with her—it could somehow work out for him. So he just needs to get rid of that handicap."

"...but that's impossible!"

Daiya smirks at my murmured response.

"Say, you told me that the protagonist might regain the memories of the previous iteration."

"Yeah."

"So next iteration, if he takes over his memories from the current iteration, because his current incarnation regained the memories of the previous iteration, he'll be able to take over the memories of the iteration before last. Right?"

".....well, I guess so."

"So if he takes over the memories of the prior iteration, he can also take over the memories of two times prior. If he takes over the memories of two times prior, he can also take over the memories of three times prior."

"...so—? The transfer student is also able to build up information during this time. The gap can't be filled up. Otonashi-sa— the transfer student already has the memories of more than 2,601 repetitions, you know? What's going to change for the protagonist if he obtains the memories of two, three times—"

"Repeat this process 100,000 times."

"...eh?"

"There's no way to deal with the imbalance of the 2,601 times already past. So we just make those 2,601 times irrelevant. The informational difference between 102,601 times and 100,000 times is only 2% or so if we use simple arithmetic. You can't call that a gap anymore. If the protagonist repeats the process that many times, he obtains the means to oppose the transfer student. Then he has to take advantage of the information he's gained and the transfer student's exhaustion to weaken her, frustrate her and make her forget her memories of the previous iterations."

"I'm—"

I'm supposed to do such a thing?

".....but he doesn't know how to retain his memories to begin with."

Right. I was able to recover my memories this time around, but only by chance.

"You said that the shock of seeing a corpse made the protagonist regain his memories, right?"

"That's what I assume...I guess."

I can't think of another reason and my gut tells me that's correct.

I was able to regain my memories because I happened to see Haruaki's corpse.

"Then it's simple," Daiya carelessly states.

"The protagonist just needs to produce corpses."

"—what the!"

I naturally become speechless.

"S-Such an act—"

"Well, listen. I guess it's certainly unreasonable to kill someone. Such an unethical protagonist would just disgust the reader. More generally speaking, the protagonist has to prepare something with the same impact as seeing a corpse."

"...that could certainly...work."

"In other words the protagonist just needs to be more tenacious in pursuing the box than the transfer student."

The bell rings. Daiya considers our talk complete and turns around.

"I'll return to the classroom. You should come quickly too, Kazu!"

"Yeah..."

But I don't feel like returning to the classroom right away and stay put instead. Daiya walks away without paying any attention to me.

I sigh.

"...there definitely might be a way for me to retain my memories. But—"

—hanging on for 100,000 times? It may be possible in theory but there's no way I could pull it off for real. There's no way a human being could bear that. It's like an inventor told me to drive a car with a top speed of 20,000km/h. Even if the car can go that fast, my body would be unable to handle the burden and end up breaking down. My mind, no, the human mind isn't capable of enduring 100,000 repetitions of the same day.

If Otonashi-san is really able to bear it, she's a special case. Please don't include me in the same category as such a monster.

But is this the only way to oppose Otonashi-san? Should I even oppose her? Wouldn't it be better for both of us if I just raised the white flag?

I let out another sigh since I can't even decide on such a simple thing.

When I look up, deciding to return to the classroom for now...

"—ah"

Haruaki pops out from behind a pillar, causing me to reflexively raise my voice.

".....Haruaki."

Did he hear our conversation? No, his face looks too serious. After all, we were only talking about a 'fictional story.' Theoretically speaking, of course.

He starts to freely plead his case. "Frankly, since I'm your friend, I get jealous when you have fun with others and leave me out, so I think it's completely fine for me to hide and eavesdrop on you. That's forgiven and forgotten."

Despite his joking tone, his expression stays serious throughout.

"Well then, Hoshii—"

Haruaki scratches his head and asks.

"—wanna try killing me?"

My breathing stops.

I have no idea what made him say these absolutely stunning words.

Haruaki observes my bewildered state for a while. I'm not even able to blink. He suddenly smiles complacently and, apparently unable to bear it any longer, bursts into laughter.

"Ah, don't tell me!—That's cruel, Haruaki! Don't tease me!"

"Ahaha! No, no, I'd never have guessed that your reaction would be that serious...!! Terrific! Hoshii, you're just too funny! Naturally I'm just joking, just joking!"

Well, that makes sense. There's no one who would believe that such a recurrence could actually take place.

"Right...A joke...of course it's just a joke."

"Of course. Naturally it's a joke—something like letting me get killed."

Something rings oddly in his last statement.

"—Haruaki?"

"—So? How can I assist you?"

Assist? What's Haruaki talking about?

Haruaki is serious and earnest once more as he continues speaking.

"Well, since my memories will be lost in the next world anyway, I guess what I can do now is limited."

Aah, I see—

Haruaki believes in the Rejecting Classroom.

He believes the story that anyone else would assume was made-up.

".....Haruaki."

"What's wrong, Hoshii?"

"Err...that was just a fictional scenario I made up, you know?"

Haruaki laughs and says in a matter-of-fact manner:

"That's a lie, isn't it?"

"Wha—"

I can't even begin to ask how he figured that out.

I mean, even I couldn't believe such a nonsensical story if someone begged me to.

"Wahaha! Are you impressed by the depth of my friendship? It makes me swallow even such a ridiculous story without hesitation!"

"Yeah."

Haruaki seems to be taken aback when I nod in response.

"N-No...don't answer so plainly! You'll make me blush!"

He bashfully scratches his nose.

"Just so you're aware, Daiya also believes that this is actually happening, you know?"

"Eh?...no, I don't think so. I mean, we're talking about Daiya the ultimate realist, remember?"

However, now that Haruaki mentions it, Daiya might have been acting a bit odd. After all, he chose a special place for our talk and sacrificed his break time. If he really thought this was just a scenario from a novel, he would have chased me away with a brief comment like "Boring. Don't write it."

"Okay, I guess he didn't buy your story 100%, but trust me—he knows that the truth isn't too far off!"

Come to think of it, Daiya's comments were a bit off the mark if they were intended as a critique of a novel. He clearly chose the answers that the protagonist character would actually want.

"There's a flaw in your story to begin with, Hoshii. Aya-chan, who clearly represents the transfer student, just arrived today, you know? You talked to Daiya during the break after first period. You didn't have enough time to come up with all of this!"

"Ah—"

That sure is true.

"I think you're telling the truth, and you're not deluded."

"...why?"

"It's a bit too well put together to be your delusion, isn't it? There's no way you'd have such a vivid imagination, Hoshii."

"How rude..."

"Well, even if you were a bit more brilliant and could come up with something like this in such a short time; I'd still believe you."

"...why?"

"Because we're friends, aren't we?"

Uwa, what is that guy saying...

I mean, how should I...keep from blushing and react if he speaks to me like this?



Haruaki frowns and stuffs a French fry into his mouth.

"I see. So Aya-chan...no, Aya Otonashi might have killed me..."

We ended up going to McDonald's, per Haruaki's suggestion. We're a pair of students in school uniforms who left school early by feigning illness, hanging out at McDonald's in broad daylight. I can't help but notice the judgmental glances of the people around us and feel the urge to flee.

"I wonder if Otonashi-san would care if she were at McDonald's in her school uniform during school hours."

"Well, I guess in Aya Otonashi's case, she wouldn't."

Haruaki now knows that he might have been killed by the girl he fell in love with at first sight, so he spits out her name with hostility.

"In other words, she's adapted to this situation over the course of more than 2,000 iterations."

Otonashi-san has become accustomed to everything being declared 'void' after each iteration. She definitely wouldn't get upset by each and every little thing within the Rejecting Classroom anymore.

Otonashi-san has adapted to an abnormal situation. Can you really say that her personality's still normal, this Otonashi-san who is trying to kill me?

"Was this supposed to be an escape attempt?"

My heart stops.

Suddenly hearing the voice of the person I was just thinking about... I cannot turn around to face the speaker behind me. I'm cemented in place.

How did she find us? I didn't even tell Daiya.

Otonashi-san walks around and stops in front of me. I am still unable to raise my head.

"Let me tell you something, Hoshino," she says with a grin on her face. "This is my 2,602nd March 2nd. I've spent this time with classmates who haven't changed a bit since they don't retain any memories and aren't aware of these time loops."

She quietly rests her hand on the table. That alone causes my body to stiffen up.

"Normally, people change, and so do their beliefs. Thus it's not at all easy to predict their actions. However, it's ridiculously easy to grasp your actions because you guys are trapped in a deadlock and can't change. It's even easier since it's the same March 2nd. I even grasped the pattern of your conversations. Hoshino, I can easily predict the range of actions a passive high school student like you would take."

I'm having a firsthand experience with the 'information difference' that Daiya mentioned. I vaguely thought that he was just talking about information involving the Rejecting Classroom or the box. But it's not just that. The most crucial information is related to 'Kazuki Hoshino'—myself. And the information I need to obtain is related to 'Aya Otonashi'. That's what Daiya meant from the start. That's why he said that the gap in our information would narrow after more recurrences.

"Got it? You can't escape from me, Hoshino. You're completely within my grasp. I could easily crush you. But if I do so, I'll also crush the important object you're holding. That's the only reason you're alive. Got it? So you'd better not anger me."

Otonashi-san seizes my hand.

"Be quiet and follow me. And then quietly obey me."

She isn't gripping my hand tightly. If I try, I should be able to shake her off. But...can I do that?...no way. I've already been taken over by Aya Otonashi. I'm aware that I'm miserable. But I just can't...defy her. I don't know how.

And despite that—despite my having no means to defy her—my hand is freed from Otonashi-san's grasp.

"What are you doing," Otonashi-san says. I wasn't able to shake her off. So her hostile words aren't directed at me.

"What am I doing, you ask?...ha!"

Her words are directed at Haruaki, who has pulled our hands apart.

"I won't hand Hoshii over to you! Can't you even get such a simple thing straight? Are you an idiot?"

Haruaki's words are childish, but his face has become stiff. It's a complete bluff. He normally never treats people like this.

Naturally, Otonashi-san doesn't fall for his provocation.

"That's not what I'm asking. Usui, it appears that you're the one who isn't using his brain. Your actions are futile. Meaningless. It seems you decided to save Hoshino, but that is merely a momentary fragile dream that's about to disappear. Next time around, you will have lost this determination and come running back to me once more, confessing to me instead of fighting against me."

Haruaki falters completely upon hearing these words. He knows that she's right. If the world resets again, Haruaki will forget our conversations during this iteration. However hostile he may be towards her right now, he's going to fall for her at first sight again, and he's going to confess to her again. Haruaki's hopelessly deadlocked.

But even though he is confronted with such a harsh and inescapable truth, Haruaki clenches his fist.

"No, you're still the one who's not using your brain, Otonashi! I might really return to my 'unaware self' each time! I guess I won't be able to keep my memories and I'm not as bright as Daiya. But you know what? I have strong faith in myself."

"I don't understand. What are you trying to say?"

"Say, Otonashi. I'm definitely at a standstill and won't change, right?"

"Yeah, that's why you're powerless."

"Ha! It's the other way around, Otonashi! If I'm not going to change, I can vouch for the me in future iterations. After all, they will be the exact same

person as I am now. I can predict their behavior without fail! Those selves are going to believe Hoshii every time he explains the situation, and they will help him every time as well. There's no world in which I'll abandon my friend Hoshii. Listen and remember this well, Otonashi—"

He points at Otonashi-san.

"—If you make Kazuki Hoshino your enemy, you will also pick a fight with an immortal!"

To be honest, his posture is anything but firm. He's under pressure, he's bluffing and his hands are even trembling. He's obviously anxious. Cool words suit him so poorly, it's not even funny—especially since he's usually clowning around in front of everyone.

But his words have definitely warmed my heart.

I mean, there's not the slightest bit of doubt in his voice. There's none of his usual exaggerated dramatic tone, either. Haruaki is speaking in a completely matter of fact manner.

"——"

Of course Otonashi-san isn't flustered at all by his unsteady posturing. But she also doesn't immediately object. She closes her mouth for a few seconds, displeased.

"...You're making me sound like the bad guy. Aren't you aware that Kazuki Hoshino is the one who dragged you into this Rejecting Classroom?"

Otonashi-san's words are precise and sharp. Haruaki takes damage from each one, but still—

"I won't doubt my ally because of that!"

Haruaki doesn't change his opinion. He refuses to avert his gaze from Otonashi-san even though he is terrified.

This isn't good. I mean, the opponent is Aya Otonashi! She isn't the one who'll suffer when Haruaki declares her an eternal enemy. Haruaki's the one who'll be in pain. The girl he'll fall in love with over and over again is going to treat him with hostility for no obvious reason. From now on, Haruaki is going to suffer in each and every iteration.

In contrast, she definitely won't feel any stress due to Haruaki's opposition.

However:

"I've lost my interest."

Otonashi-san is the one who averts her gaze first and turns away.

"All of your actions will become meaningless anyway when the next iteration begins."

She spits out these words and leaves.

If anyone but Otonashi-san had said something like that, it might have sounded a little like sour grapes. But coming from her, it doesn't sound like that at all. In the first place, how could Otonashi-san lose to him when she doesn't care about him anyway?

Thus, she simply voiced her thoughts. She came to the conclusion that it would be more convenient to deal with me in a more advantageous situation in the future.

Otonashi-san doesn't feel anything for us. Of course she doesn't fear us, but she isn't angry at us and doesn't scorn us either.

So I wonder—why?

No, it's just my imagination. A wrong guess. An extreme misunderstanding. But even so, really, honestly, just for an instant—

Didn't she look just a bit—down?

"Say...Hoshii,"

Haruaki is still staring at the automatic door that Otonashi-san just walked through.

"Do you think I'm going to be killed?"

No way...is almost how I respond. But I realize what happened last time could easily happen again, so I stay silent.



As expected, it was raining on March 3rd of the 2,602nd iteration. I went to school a bit earlier than last time and avoided the spot where the accident occurred, although I had to take a detour. I did so in order to ward off Otonashi-san's attack...or, truth be told, I simply didn't want to see that scene again.

Daiya is already present when I arrive at the classroom. He comes over when he sees me.

"What's wrong, Daiya?"

For some reason Daiya doesn't answer right away. He looks deep into my eyes. He's as good at hiding his feelings as ever, but I can still tell that something weird is going on.

".....about the novel we talked about yesterday."

Daiya makes it a point to speak indifferently. He's referring to the 'novel', but he's actually talking about 'my current situation'.

"There's something that's been bothering me. Why doesn't the transfer student lose her memories like the protagonist?"

I can't answer his question, because I don't understand why he's even talking about this.

"Even the protagonist—the creator of that Rejecting Classroom—loses his memories. So even if we assume that the transfer student possesses some special power, wouldn't it be too convenient for her to automatically retain the memories of the recurrences? I think it would be better to have the protagonist and transfer student both be able to retain their memories by employing the same method."

"...you might be right."

I agree without thinking much about the deeper meaning of what he's saying. Maybe I am unable to fully grasp his words because he's still framing this as part of a 'novel'.

"The protagonist was able to keep his memories because he saw a corpse, right?"

"...I think so."

"The corpse was result of a truck accident, right? There's no way the transfer student who's gone through the same day 2,601 times, wouldn't know of this truck, right? If the transfer student was involved with the accident, then it was without a doubt intentional. That's why you said that the 'friend of the protagonist' 'got killed'."

I nod.

"But something bothered me about this scenario."

"Why? Am I wrong?"

"No, not at all. It's certainly an effective attack against the protagonist...but only if we assume that he will retain his memories. There's no meaning in a successful attack if the protagonist forgets it right away."

"I don't get what you're trying to say..."

"The goal of the transfer student is to steal the box from the protagonist, right?"

"Yeah."

"Try to think from the transfer student's perspective. The transfer student finally found the person she's been searching for—the protagonist. Although the transfer student could have kept quiet, she openly explained the situation to the protagonist. A clueless opponent versus an opponent who was attacked and is thus on guard—who'd be easier to steal the box from? Of course it'd be the clueless opponent. So why do you think the transfer student explained the situation to the protagonist?"

"Err...because the transfer student thought the protagonist would forget?"

"Right. She concluded that it wouldn't matter. That she told him at all was probably just a way for her to idly entertain herself; you might also call it negligence."

"But the accident could only occur intentionally, right? So it must have been an attack on me..."

"I guess it was intentional. But try to think like this: the transfer student didn't predict that the protagonist would see the corpse."

In other words, the purpose of the accident wasn't to attack me?

I reflect on his words once again.

"Ah—"

I hastily look around the classroom. The transfer student—Aya Otonashi— isn't here. She's surely still at the site of the accident.

"No way...that's totally abnormal!"

"Of course. There's no way that a person who has adapted to 2,602 loops could stay completely sane."

Aya Otonashi killed someone.

She did so not to attack me, but in order to retain her own memories.

I remember. I really don't want to, but I remember. This accident didn't happen for the first time during the 2,601st loop. She may have already caused it to happen during each of the 2,600 other loops.

So will she continue to kill people in order to 'transfer'?

Will I be forced to silently observe her murders?

Will Haruaki be killed again this time?

"—Haruaki!"

"Mh? What's wrong, Hoshii?"

Haruaki has entered the classroom just now and stands beside the door.

What does this mean? Haruaki isn't the target?...right, there's no need for him to be the corpse, is there?

"Well, enough with your novel, Kazu...let's get to the point," Daiya continues while ignoring Haruaki.

"It seems there was an accident a short while ago."

Daiya takes a deep breath and says, "Aya Otonashi was run over by a truck."

What—?

Aah, I see.

Even if she's the target, she doesn't care.

4,609th time

“Haruaki was run over by a truck.”

5,232nd time

“Kasumi Mogi was run over by a truck.”

27,753rd time

Our class is playing soccer during P.E.

Because I got a nosebleed, I am resting on Mogi-san's lap.

I suddenly start to wonder about her feelings. Could it be that by letting me rest on her lap, she is trying, even if just a tiny bit, to attract my interest?

I haven't the foggiest—she is as expressionless as ever when I casually peek up at her.

"...Mogi-san"

"What is it?"

"What are you thinking about right now?"

"Eh?"

Mogi-san tilts her head, but she doesn't seem to have a response. Her only reaction to my question is a bewildered look.

This makes me start to wonder—if it's so hard to recognize my partner's feelings, can love really progress?

Why did I fall in love with such a difficult girl?

Really—when on earth did I first fall in love with her?

I try to remember.

".....Huh?"

"...What's wrong?" Mogi-san asks when I make a sudden sound.

"N-No...nothing!"

My face probably isn't signaling 'nothing.' Mogi-san is aware of that. But since she doesn't have the social skills to question me about it, she stays silent and refrains from saying anything.

I stand up without warning Mogi-san.

"Ah, um...it seems my nosebleed has stopped."

"...mh."

Our conversation ends with these plain words.

Why did I voluntarily abandon such a wonderful situation? I might never have another chance at such bliss.

But—it's impossible.

Because no matter how hard I try—I can't remember.

I can't remember. I can't remember. I can't remember!...I can't remember when I fell in love with her!

Why did I fall in love? What was the trigger? Or was I simply attracted to her before I knew it, even without any special event?

I should know this; how could I possibly forget, but...I can't remember, no matter how hard I try.

It wasn't love at first sight, and we have almost nothing in common besides the fact that we're classmates.

And yet, why did this happen out of the blue? It can't have been a completely spontaneous awakening of love, can i—

"—no way..."

Although hard to believe, it's the only thing I can think of. A completely spontaneous awakening of love.

"What's wrong? Are you alright?...Should we go to the nurse's office?"

Mogi-san makes her suggestion as calmly as ever. I am indeed very happy that she's worried about me. Simply happy. This feeling is not fake.

"...I'm alright. I was just thinking about something."

I repeatedly ask myself whether this is some kind of mistake. But the more I think about it, the more true it seems.

I wasn't attracted to Mogi-san.

Until when? Right—

—I wasn't attracted to her until yesterday.

"—Ah, I see."

I look at Aya Otonashi, the transfer student who is just standing around in the middle of the yard.

When was the event that attracted me to Mogi-san? —ah, that's easy. It wasn't yesterday. But today I am already in love. So when was it?

It was only possible—sometime between yesterday and today.

During the more than 20,000 loops that occurred due to the Rejecting Classroom.

Ah, I remembered. Only a fragment, but I probably remembered more than usual. Still, it's but a fragment, so most of my memories remain lost.

I have lost my most important memory—how I fell in love with Mogi-san. And I definitely won't regain this memory. I can't share anything with Mogi-san. An unrequited love I can't do anything about, no matter how much time passes; only my feelings will grow stronger.

No, it may be more than that. This love might disappear as soon as the Rejecting Classroom ends. I mean, this love shouldn't even exist in the absence of the Rejecting Classroom.

That's strange. That's definitely strange. This love is no lie.

But still, is this love a fake that couldn't exist in the absence of the *box*?

A sudden gust of wind blows. It lifts up Mogi-san's skirt. I wonder why I have a faint feeling that I've already seen these light blue panties?

No, I *am* familiar with them.

I know that Mogi-san is wearing light blue panties today.

Just as I know that Aya Otonashi has sacrificed Kasumi Mogi more than anyone else in order to retain her own memories.

Therefore, I decide—

To defend this Rejecting Classroom.



This time, Aya Otonashi doesn't approach me first.

Actually, the same thing might have happened during the last loop. My memories are vague, but I think this situation has persisted for a while.

Aya Otonashi is eating alone during lunch break, chewing her sandwich with great weariness.

This time it is I who approaches her.

Just by doing so, my body stiffens and my heartbeat accelerates. Otonashi-san's rejection of others has become a massive barrier, powerful enough to apply pressure all on its own.

"...Otonashi-san."

I ready myself and call out to her. However, Otonashi-san doesn't even turn around. This close up, there's no way she didn't hear me, so I continue anyway.

"I have something to discuss."

"I don't."

She turns me down without batting an eye.

"Otonashi-san."

No reaction. She just continues to halfheartedly chew on her sandwich.

She seems to plan to ignore me no matter what I say. In that case I simply have to make it impossible for her to ignore me.

The right trigger springs to mind after I think a bit.

"...Maria."

The chewing motions of her mouth come to a stop.

"I have something to discuss."

She still doesn't even look at me. She also doesn't say anything.

The classroom is dead silent. Our classmates are all looking at us while holding their breaths.

Otonashi-san finally seems to lose her patience and sighs.

"I never thought you'd say that name. Seems like you've remembered quite a lot this time."

"Yeah, so—"

"Even so, there's nothing to discuss with you."

Once again she begins to listlessly chew her sandwich.

"Why!"

My classmates focus on me once I suddenly start shouting.

"Why?! Aren't I the person you have to deal with?! So why don't you even try listening to me!?"

"Why, you ask?" she sneers. "You honestly don't know? Ha! Look at how stupidly you're acting once again. You never think for yourself. Why should I associate with a person like that?"

"...I don't know how I've acted previously."

"Previously? How foolish. What's different about you now? You're just the same!"

"How can you say for sure? Maybe I'm going to offer you my help. In that case—"

"It basically doesn't matter."

Otonashi-san spits out these words without even letting me finish.

I am about to instinctively object. But this objection is erased by Otonashi-san's next sentence.

"Because you haven't made this proposal just two or three times already."

"Eh—?"

I am so stunned that my jaw practically drops. Curling her mouth up slightly, Otonashi-san rewraps her half-eaten sandwich and speaks:

"Very well. I'm forced to spend my time on plenty of useless things anyway. This isn't just the second or third time I'm giving you this explanation, but I'll tell you anyway."

Otonashi-san stands up and starts to walk away.

I have no choice but to quietly follow her.



As always, she leads me to the rear of the school building. And as always, Otonashi-san leans against the wall.

"I'll say this right at the beginning. I won't have a conversation with you. You will just listen to my words like an idiot."

"...I can decide that on my own."

I say so to be a bit rebellious, but Otonashi-san just stabs me a cold glare.

"Hoshino, do you know which iteration this is? No, you don't. This is the 27,753rd iteration."

That number is far too outrageous.

"...did you specifically count each time?"

"Yeah, since there's no way to confirm the number if I stop counting even once. If I forget to do so, I'll lose myself. Thus, I'm always keeping count."

It's certainly a bit calming if you know how many steps you've taken towards an unknown destination.

"I have repeated everything so many times. I have already tried almost all possible ways to approach you. I can't even imagine anything I haven't tried yet."

"That's why you think talking to me is pointless?"

"Yeah."

"You're not even trying to persuade me to hand the box over to you?"

"I have already given up on that long ago."

"Why? At some point within these recurrences, I should have been cooperative at least once."

"Yeah, of course. There were iterations when you treated me with hostility, and there were also times when you cooperated. But you know what? It doesn't matter. Either way, you never hand over the box."

I didn't hand over the box even when I was cooperating? ...well, it figures. I wouldn't be here 'now' if Otonashi-san had obtained the box.

"Just confirming: you're sure that I own the box, right?"

"That's been a matter for constant internal debate. But my conclusion is always the same. Kazuki Hoshino is, without a doubt, the *owner*."

"Why do you think so?"

"There aren't as many suspects as you may think. The full explanation would take me too long to explain so I'll cut it short: it's impossible for the few plausible suspects to deceive me all 27,753 times. Hence, you're the only possible owner. Furthermore, there's inarguable circumstantial evidence that's unrelated to the Rejecting Classroom, right?"

She was right—I had previously met the distributor of the box—'*

"Regardless, you never take out the box. Rather, you can't. I marked you as the owner more than 20,000 iterations ago."

"So you've given up?"

This Otonashi-san who spares no effort in order to obtain a box?

"I have not given up. I just cannot obtain the box. Let's assume you're searching for a 100 yen coin that should be in your wallet, but you can't find it however many times you turn your wallet inside out. Searching every corner of the wallet is easy. Still, you can't find the coin. In that case you have to assume that the coin isn't there anymore. Just like that, over these 27,753 recurrences I've come to the conclusion that 'I cannot obtain the box from Kazuki Hoshino'."

Otonashi-san scowls at me for a moment and turns away.

"Well then, the side show has ended. Still want to say something?"

"...Yeah! That's why I wanted to talk to you in the first place."

I have to say it.

I have decided. I have decided to defend the Rejecting Classroom.

Otonashi-san, who has come to kill Mogi-san countless times, I will make her—

"I will make you, Otonashi-san, no, Aya Otonashi—"

"—an enemy?"

"—huh?!"

She easily predicted my bold move to oppose her. And she's still uninterested and wants to ignore me.

When she sees that I am speechless and shocked from the bottom of my heart, Otonashi-san lets out a sigh. She reluctantly turns to me.

"Hoshino, do you still not understand? How much time do you think I've spent together with you, idiot-boy? This is just another pattern that I've already repeated often enough to be tired of. There's no way I wouldn't see through it, is there?"

"W-What—"

I've made such a bold move countless times already?

Why was it completely ineffective every time?

"Incidentally, let me tell you one other thing. Even if your beliefs shaped your decision to oppose me, and you tried to maintain those memories across each iteration: in the end you'd abandon your opposition. I'm dead sure."

"T-There's no—"

After all, it would mean that I'd come to terms with her killing Mogi-san; that I'd choose to erase my feelings for Mogi-san.

"You can't believe me? Want me to tell you the reason that I've heard you state so many times before?"

I bite my lips.

Otonashi-san considers the conversation concluded and turns away.

"Your values could outlast more than 20,000 repetitions without trouble. I'll give you credit for that."

I spontaneously raise my head.

Did she just 'acknowledge' me? *Otonashi-san?*

"Wait a moment."

There is one more thing I must ask, no matter what.

Otonashi-san turns her head toward me.

"You've stopped trying to retrieve the box from me, right?"

"Yeah. Didn't I say so?"

"Then...what are you planning to do from now on?"

There is no change in Otonashi-san's expression. She still gazes straight at me without averting her eyes.

Her extremely straightforward gaze forces me to lower my eyes in response.

"Ah—"

In that instant...Otonashi-san walks away without saying anything else.

Without having answered my question.



Otonashi-san didn't return to the classroom afterwards—maybe she went home.

My fifth period class is mathematics. I can't understand the formulas right away, although I've probably seen them a gazillion times already. Instead, I watch Mogi-san the entire time.

Will I really abandon Mogi-san? Will I really break off my feelings for her of my own accord?

No. That isn't possible. It doesn't matter what my past self thought.

My current self won't give up on Mogi-san. That's all that matters.

Fifth period ends.

I immediately head over to Mogi-san. She notices me and looks back at me with her almond eyes. My body stiffens like a stone. My heart loses its usual rhythm.

Just from looking at her. It demonstrates that what I'm about to tell her is truly special.

It's an action I would never take in my usual everyday life.

But I can't help it. I can't think of any other way to retain my memories.

I can't think of another method besides confessing to Mogi-san.

"...Mogi-san"

I guess I'm making a pretty strange face right now. Mogi-san looks at me inquisitively and inclines her head.

"Err, there's something I'd like to—"

'Please wait until tomorrow.'

"—ah"

An image passes through my mind. A voice starts arbitrarily replaying in my head. I feel a sensation so clear and bright, it hurts as if glass were thrust into my eyes, ears and brain.

My chest is pulsating aggressively as if it were being beaten by a hammer.

N-No—

I don't want to remember. Even though I don't want to remember. Even though I repeatedly wanted to erase that memory, it doesn't disappear. Even though I can forget any other memory, no matter how significant, this is the one I cannot forget.

Yeah, that's right—

A long time ago—I already confessed to Mogi-san.

"...what's wrong?"

".....sorry, it's nothing."

I put some distance between us. Mogi-san raises her eyebrows in suspicion but doesn't question me any further.

I return to my seat and let my upper body fall across the desk.

".....I see."

Now that I think about it, it's obvious. After all, I've come to repeat this day over 20,000 times.

I confess to Mogi-san. But I forget. So I confess again. And forget again. In order to resist the Rejecting Classroom, I've made this confession I didn't even want to make, over and over and over and over again, and forgotten it just as many times.

And each time I received the answer I most wanted to avoid hearing.

It's always the same one. It's always the same answer. Well, there's no way it would change. Mogi-san can't retain her memories and thus her answer can't change either.

That answer—

"Please wait until tomorrow."

That's awful. That tomorrow you're speaking of will never come.

I made a peerless resolution, plucked up the courage I'd normally be incapable of, stretched my nerves to the limit—but in the end, my earnest words vanished entirely into oblivion. And then I'm forced to interact with Mogi-san, who has forgotten about my confessions countless times.

...I see. They aren't just voided.

There hasn't been anything to begin with.

This world was empty from the very start. There's no value to be found in a world where everything that happens becomes void. There's just as little value to be found in beautiful things, ugly things, precious things, shabby things, beloved things, hateful things.

For that reason nothing exists. There is only emptiness.

The elusive emptiness called the Rejecting Classroom.

I feel nauseated. I am being forced to breathe in a dreadful environment. While I feel the urge to empty my lungs of air, I can't, as I wouldn't be able to continue living here anymore. I can't live without breathing. But if I continue to breathe in emptiness, my body will become empty as well. I'll become as hollow as a sponge.

Or—was it already too late for me long ago, and have I already become empty?

"What's wrong, Kazu-kun? Are you feeling sick?"

When I hear a familiar voice, I raise my head slowly while still slumped over on my desk. Kokone is standing in front of me, frowning.

"You had a nosebleed during P.E., right? Maybe that's why? If you don't feel well, should we go to the nurse's office?"

"There's no need to worry about him, Kiri. I bet the origin of his illness is the lap he slept on rather than his nosebleed," says Daiya. I hadn't noticed him, but I guess he'd been standing nearby.

"Lap...? ...ah! I see! So that's it! Whaaat, just love-sickness..."

Then she grins and slaps me on the shoulders encouragingly.

"Yo-u! You you! Isn't this a bit saucy for you? Please don't get involved with something mature like looove."

"Swayed by such a plain seduction—ludicrous."

"N-No! I've always loved—"

I stop midway. That was a verbal slip on multiple levels. For one thing, I'd admit my feelings for Mogi-san by doing so, but beyond that—

"Ha? You didn't have any special feelings for Mogi until yesterday, did you?"
—it would not be true.

As a matter of fact, I fell in love with her today. It was a sudden awakening on my part, at least from the point of view of Daiya and everyone else. And that's why no one knew of my fondness for her, even though my attitude makes it clearly visible.

"Hey hey, Daiya, it looks like this guy just admitted his unrequited love for Kasumi. Uhihi."

Kokone grins and jabs at Daiya with her elbow.

"Yeah. In the best case scenario this might provide me with some extra entertainment."

"Uhehe...the love of others is fun after all! Mh, Mh. Don't worry. Onee-chan is supporting you! I'll give you advice and help you! If you get dumped, I'll even console you! But should you succeed, I'll kill you, since I'd get irritated."

"No worries. When the two of them start going out, I'll steal her from him."

"Uwaa, that sounds funny! The misfortune of others and muddled love triangles! Superb!"

Those two really are cruel, ignoring my under-the-weather condition.

Well, fortunately XX is not here. If he were, then he'd tread on this opportunity and lead the conversation in a way that would end in a—

"—huh?"

"Mhh? What's the matter, Kazu-kun?"

"No, just...I was wondering where he is. Is he taking today off?"

"Who are you talking about?" Daiya asks with a suspicious look.

That's odd. I thought Daiya would know who I was talking about when I said that.

"You don't know? Naturally it's—"

—err, who?

Huh? Wait a sec! I am...I am about to say a certain person's name. So why have I forgotten not only his name, but also his face?

"...Kazu-kun? What's wrong? Who were you talking about?"

I feel sick, as if I had swallowed something half-liquid and slimy that makes me want to rip out my gullet. But I am lucky to still be able to feel that disgust. If I gulped it down completely and excreted it, then XX would disappear.

"H-Hey...Kazu-kun!"

No problem. I can remember it all. I can remember thanks to that feeling of disgust.

"—Haruaki"

The name of my dear friend. The companion who pledged to be my ally forever.

...I'm only grasping at straws, but I hope anyway. Hope that I'm the only one who forgot about Haruaki for some reason. But I really am an idiot. That hope—

"Hey, Kazu. Who is that 'Haruaki'?"

—could never be fulfilled.

I grit my teeth upon feeling this vexing sensation. Daiya and Kokone frown at my strange behavior.

Those two have forgotten about him—even though as his childhood friends, they've known him far longer than I have.

The fact that 'Haruaki' does not exist here is thrust at me mercilessly, and—

"I'll go home."

—causes a fatal wound.

I stand, pick up my bag, turn my back to them and walk out of the classroom.

I can't endure being here any longer.

Why isn't Haruaki here?

I know why. I know that Haruaki has been 'rejected'.

By whom? That's obvious. He was definitely 'rejected' by the *protagonist* who created this Rejecting Classroom.

I got it all wrong. I thought the Rejecting Classroom was going to preserve the flow of everyday life forever. How foolish. There is no way that things would work out that way. Everyday life is called everyday life because it

flows continuously. If you stop the flow of a river, then mud would gather and paint it black. It's just like that. Sediment has gathered here as well.

Aah, I see. I guess I've noticed this phenomenon many times already. No matter how many loops I endure, I always rediscover this fact. And then I stop opposing Aya Otonashi.

Aya Otonashi will destroy the Rejecting Classroom.

And knowing what I know now, why would I stop her?

The bell rings. Most of my classmates should have returned to their seats by now.

So before leaving the classroom I turn around.

An empty seat. Another empty seat. Another empty seat. And another one over there. Aah...I already realized this, but no one else finds the large number of empty seats unusual.



I probably could've figured it out, but I didn't do so because I didn't want to admit it.

Aya Otonashi has come to the conclusion that it is impossible to retrieve the box from me.

It should be easy enough to end the Rejecting Classroom as soon as you identify the culprit. She's gone through over 20,000 iterations in order to retrieve the box.

So...what should she do?

Isn't it obvious?

My limbs whirl around as I am run over by the truck. It's kinda comical to see my own right leg lying far away from me.

"So it ends here..."

I get 'killed'. I let myself get killed.

"27,753 meaningless recurrences. So all this time ends in completely wasted effort? I have to...I have to admit that even I am getting tired."

To be precise, I'm not dead yet. But lying in a pool of blood, I know: I will die. I will not be rescued. And I've indeed been killed by her.

"Ugh...! I've spent this outrageous amount of time and this is what I get. I've never hated my own impotence more than right now...!" She murmurs with bitter regret.

"...let's move on. Since I couldn't find the box here, I'll just have to seek the next one."

Aya Otonashi's eyes aren't perceiving me anymore. No, surely those eyes have never perceived me properly in the first place.

From start to finish Aya Otonashi has just been looking at the box inside me.

Will this day also be rendered 'void'? No, it won't. If the box called the Rejecting Classroom is inside my body, then it will get smashed when I die. And like my flesh was smashed by the truck, this box is already smashed as well.

This day won't repeat anymore.

Aah, what irony. If this were the only way to end the Rejecting Classroom, then death is the only thing that's been preordained from the start. Well, naturally it's empty. This world was surely—the world after my death.

But with this, our battle comes to an end.

It was a one-sided fight with no surprises, but it has come to an end here.

Yeah...that's what you're convinced of, right? Otonashi-san?

I pity you. I really do, Otonashi-san!

I guess it's because you kept ignoring me. You wouldn't have made such a mistake otherwise.

That's why you wasted so much time.

Listen, Otonashi-san. It's simple enough if you think about it. There's no way that a regular person like me could be the *protagonist*.

I want to tell her that, but I'm unable to do so anymore. I can't even move my mouth.

My consciousness fades away. I die.

Which—ends nothing.

I am inside a scene that I can only remember within my dreams.

I have accepted the *box* from him.

"Please be at ease! Usually such a thing comes with a catch, but this one has none. You won't lose anything precious, nor will your soul be stolen. You know, it's not the nature of the box that causes such tragic consequences, it's the nature of the human who uses it. If you use it correctly, your wish will come true without any risk."

If you use it correctly—

Is it really so easy to use it correctly? I don't know. I don't know, but even if using a box is risky, it's still an extraordinary opportunity. It's like a winning lottery ticket. There's always the possibility that you might ruin your life with your sudden wealth. But you wouldn't normally worry about that, right?

So who would ever refuse to accept this box?

"—What's the meaning of this?"

Because here's a person who chooses to return the box.

"Are you holding yourself back for some reason? Do you not believe me? Or—do you fear me?"

Of course I'm worried about all of these issues.

But my primary reason for rejecting the box lies elsewhere. I simply don't need it.

You see, my wish is for my everyday life to continue. I have already attained this goal without any need for that box.

I'm like a trillionaire who doesn't bother to strive for an extra million yen. Of course I'm aware of its value. Even so, I don't need to accept the box from such a mysterious person.

Right. I rejected the box.

Thus—

Even if I did wish for this recurring world so that my everyday life would continue, there's no way that I could be the culprit.

27,753rd time

**rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp*—*

What is this sound? It's coming from inside me, and so, so soft that I almost fail to notice it—but overlooking it would be a fatal error.

**rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp*—*

There's a tiny little rasp being applied to me. Where? Well, the sound comes from within me, so it's shaving away at my insides, of course.

**rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp*—*

I have to cover my ears because the sound feels so unbelievably noisy—even though it's not—but doing so just makes it seem even louder. Aah, naturally. Of course I'll hear the sound coming from within me even better when I block off outside sounds. So I can't even cover my ears. I'll never ever be able to escape from the sound of myself being abraded.

And it hurts. Getting abraded always hurts. I bet this is what it feels like when your heart turns into a blowfish—a continuous prickling pain. Are these feelings of guilt? They are more stubborn than I thought; I was sure that guilt would be the first feeling that I'd lose.

**rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp*—*

I'm getting abraded.

My heart.

My self.

Aah, if this continues, my insides will lose their shape and crumble into small pieces like wood shavings. No...It's already—too late. I've already been reduced to small fragments.

Over these 20,000 iterations, I lost my sense of self. I'm aware of this. I couldn't endure this boredom and lost my heart. I can't even communicate properly with others anymore.

This world is rejecting me.

Well, of course. From the very start, this was never a place where I belonged. I've forcefully thrust myself into it. Their classroom is constantly rejecting me.

I know how to obtain relief.

But I won't choose to do so.

That is because—my wish hasn't been granted yet.

...Huh? But I have already crumbled into small pieces. So how come the only thing I still retain is this wish? Is this even possible? My wish was abraded along with my heart. As proof—

—I can't remember it.

"—ahaha"

I laugh unintentionally. Right, I can't remember. Ahaha, I can't remember. What was my wish again? Come on, let me remember! Ahaha stop joking with me! Why did I endure the endless torture of these loops? I can only laugh. Though I can only laugh...aah, I have already forgotten how to truly laugh long ago, and so I laugh emotionlessly.

So—I might as well just end it.

An extremely simple conclusion. Why did it take me so long to think of it?

I just have to kill him. Right, I just have to kill him. I just have to kill Kazuki Hoshino. After all, he's the origin of this agony. If I can obtain relief by doing so, then I just have to kill him quickly.

But somehow I know.

These 'shackles' that were once my 'wish' won't ever release me.

5000th time

27756th time

27755th time

0th time

1st time

1000th time

6000th time

9999th time

9000th time

8000th time

7000th time



27754th time

27,754th time

My body rapidly became cold and then empty. I should have become empty as well, but I open my eyes like normal. Unable to endure the freezing cold that should already have dissipated, I embrace myself on the bed and tremble.

I was killed.

On March 2nd of some loop.

Right, even if I die, the Rejecting Classroom continues unchanged. After realizing this, I feel as though I'm really becoming empty. The frost doesn't seem ready to fade anytime soon.

I can't stand to stay here for very long, so I leave early for school without eating a proper breakfast.

I see the familiar cloudy sky. Tomorrow it's going to rain. I wonder when I've last seen the sun?

Nobody is in the classroom. Well, that's only natural since I'm an hour early.

A question suddenly occurs to me. Why do I so stubbornly revisit my classroom? I've witnessed the recurrence of the Rejecting Classroom many times already; I'm aware of it even now. So can't I just avoid going to school to resist this recurrence?

No...I'll go! Yeah, I'll still go. If I'm healthy, I go to school. This is my everyday life. It's definitely something I wouldn't even dream of changing. An act I'll pursue at any cost; maintaining my everyday life. My one and only faith.

Ah, I see. That might be the reason I'm still here. I don't understand the underlying logic at all, but that's just how I feel.

Even if I end up alone in this classroom.

"——"

I move to the center of the classroom. I climb onto someone's desk without taking off my shoes. I try to silently apologize, but when I attempt to recall whose desk I'm standing on, I can't remember the person's name or face. Still, I really am sorry.

I look around. It's not like I expected to trigger a change by standing on a desk, but there is no one in the dimly lit classroom.

There is no one in the classroom.

There is no one in the classroom.

".....Hm, I'm kinda cold."

I embrace myself.

The classroom door opens with a slight sound. The person coming in immediately spots me standing on his desk and frowns.

"...What are you doing there, Kazu?"

Daiya gives me an uncomfortable look.

After that simple, everyday interaction, my face relaxes.

".....Aah, really, I'm relieved," I murmur, and climb down from the desk.

Daiya continues to frown as he watches me. "You know, Daiya, seeing you really calms me down."

"That's...fortunate."

"After all, you're definitely the real Daiya."

"...hey Kazu. For the first time in ages, I'm feeling scared of a human being."

"But you know, even if you're the real Daiya, this world is still a fake everyday life. I can't share anything with you. The next Daiya won't know the current me. It's like I'm the only one outside of the T.V. It's a one-sided relationship. So can I really claim that you're here?"

That's why there is no one here.

—no one?

"Ah—"

No, that's not correct.

There is just one other person here.

There is just one other person who can share memories with me. There is a person who can't escape as long I make sure to retain my memories.

Aah, I see. All this time, only the two of us were inside this Rejecting Classroom. We've been next to each other all the time, unable to break out and not even bothering to try, confined within this tiny, tiny space the size of our classroom. But I never had the chance to realize this because she's been treating me as an enemy.

I sit in my own seat.

Her seat is the one next to mine.

...I can't believe it. Just by imagining her sitting there, I've calmed down a bit—even though she was the one who killed me.



Is it because of this?

Because? Because of what? I don't understand the meaning of this. I can't grasp my own feelings, but my body temperature drops even further. Rapidly. No, worse. My body was already cold to the core, but now it freezes, aches, reaches absolute zero and then completely stiffens.

"I am Aya Otonashi. I'm pleased to meet you."

The 'Transfer Student' almost behaves like a real transfer student and smiles gently, seeming a bit abashed.

".....what on earth?"

I can't understand the meaning of this.

No, to be honest, I understand.

"I'm just as affected by the Rejecting Classroom as anyone else. If I surrendered and stopped trying to preserve my memories, I'd get captured by it right away. I would live meaninglessly within this endless recurrence. Giving in would be as easy as spilling a cup of water that you're awkwardly balancing on top of your head."

—a voice I've heard once before replays in my head.

I look at the girl standing there. I review her appearance, come to the conclusion that it has to be her, but still can't believe it.

She is—Aya Otonashi?

That's impossible. After all, there's no way she'd give up.

Yeah, even if she recognized that the person she's been chasing for more than 20,000 'School Transfers' wasn't the culprit, and everything she's done so far became meaningless as a result—there's no way she'd give up. There's just no way! There's just no way she would ever give up!

That just—wouldn't suit her.

Our class is half its original size because people have been 'rejected'. Even so, everyone remaining is lobbing questions at her. She answers them

concisely and simply, but properly. She doesn't coldly reject them like she used to.

She's acting...almost like a real transfer student.

This scene should not be possible, so it must be fake. A lie. Everyone is just a lie. Everything is a lie. Then...is Aya Otonashi a lie as well?

—I won't,

—I won't,

"I won't permit this!"

Even if everyone else permits it, I won't.

I won't let Aya Otonashi become a fake.

"...what's the matter, Hoshino?" Kokubo-sensei asks for some reason. Only then do I realize that I've suddenly stood up.

I sneak a peek at Mogi-san. The glances of my classmates are focused on me, hers included. But as I expected, I'm unable to guess what thoughts lie behind her expressionless face.

She definitely wouldn't respond if I asked her what she thinks of what I'm about to do. We've spent a long time together in this classroom. Despite that, our relationship has come to a standstill.

Tomorrow needs to arrive so that our relationship can move beyond merely being classmates.

Right, Mogi-san is not here.

There is no one here.

That's why...I've had enough already.

I abandon all my classmates who will forget my strange behavior anyway.

I look only at Otonashi-san. I walk toward the platform she's standing on.

The action that I'm about to take is as unnatural for me as that attempted confession was for Mogi-san.

I stand in front of Otonashi-san.

Otonashi-san doesn't show any signs of uneasiness and takes a long, evaluative look at me. I get extremely irritated by her expression, since it suggests that she's seeing me for the first time.

"Hey, what's wrong, Hoshino?"

On the surface, Kokubo-sensei's voice is calm, but I can recognize its underlying uneasiness. My classmates also ask similar questions.

I ignore them all and kneel in front of Otonashi-san. I lower my head and hold out my hand.

"What are you doing?" Otonashi-san asks. She adopts a polite tone totally different from the way she would normally address me.

"I have come to meet thee."

In that case I'll do so, too!

"...what are you saying?"

"I have come to meet thee, m'lady Maria. I am Hathaway, the one pledged to protect only thee, e'en it mean the betrayal of all others and their eternal enmity."

The background noise from the people around us disappears with comical rapidity. Yeah, that's right. In order to take back Otonashi-san, my first step is to make her realize that these people do not exist. Their complete silence should be quite helpful in that respect.

Without raising my head, I wait for Aya Otonashi to take my hand. I wait, utterly still, for her to lay her hand on mine and start the dance.

But it doesn't work out that way.

Otonashi-san doesn't take my hand.

Instead I collapse to the side, producing a dull sound.

"...you're gross."

Since my head was lowered, I don't know what kind of attack I was targeted with. But as I look up at her from the ground, I realize that she attacked me with a knee kick from the right.

Aah, yeah. Totally understandable. Why was I so naïvely deluded, thinking that she'd reach her hand out to me?

"—Heh"

Without a doubt, if she really is 'Aya Otonashi', then there's no way she'd be so kind as to reach her hand out to me.

"Ha, hahaha..."

Apparently unable to hold it in any longer, Otonashi-san laughs. She seems to be amused from the bottom of her heart, to an extent I probably have never seen during those 20,000 recurrences.

I'm still lying on the ground and my head hurts, but my cheeks relax in relief.

"You've made me wait for quite a while, haven't you, my beloved Hathaway? I'm amazed you dared to make a frail lady who can barely lift more than a spoon, wait for so long. I never thought you'd abandon me 27,753 times on the battlefield!"

Otonashi-san leans over me and holds out her hand.

She grabs my hand and forcefully yanks me to my feet.

Yeah, that's it.

That's how Aya Otonashi is supposed to act.

"...but thanks to that you've become quite tough."

Otonashi opens her eyes wide in surprise. Then she smile faintly once again.

"Hathaway—you, on the other hand, have developed quite the silver tongue."

With those words, without releasing my wrist for a single moment, Otonashi-san pulls me out of the classroom.

Ignoring homeroom. Ignoring the teacher. Ignoring the students. Ignoring everything. We leave the classroom, ignoring everything I have abandoned.



After dragging me out of the classroom, Otonashi had me sit on the rear seat of a large motorcycle and don a helmet. I'd never experienced such frightening speeds before, and asked her in a quivering voice whether she had a license while wrapping my arms around her surprisingly slender waist. (Well, it's actually not surprising at all since she's just a girl, but my image of her is one of absolute reliability and resoluteness.) She bluntly answered my question by saying "Of course not."

"I had too much spare time due to all the 'School Transfers', so I acquired this skill. I spend my time quite efficiently, don't you think?"

I have to admit that her motorcycle skills don't seem half bad.

When I ask her whether she has acquired any other skills, she tells me "Of course." Driving is within my range of expectation, but she's also picked up various martial arts, several sports, some additional languages, how to play various musical instruments...and the list goes on and on. Broadly speaking, she's tried out just about everything she could within the constraints of the Rejecting Classroom. But Otonashi-san, who'd apparently be able to get a near-perfect score on the National Central Test for University Admissions,

also proclaims "Well, I knew most of that stuff already before the 'School Transfers'."

Her basic specs might have started out high, but the amount of time she spent within those 27,754 loops is even more ridiculous. I can't calculate it exactly, but that would be roughly equivalent to 76 years, or a human lifespan. When I think about it some more, the length of time she's been alive boggles my mind.

"Say, Otonashi-san. You're the same age as I am, right?"

Probably due to that train of thought, I've become curious about her physical age.

"...no, I'm not."

"Eh? Then how old are you?"

"That doesn't matter, does it?" Otonashi-san answers in a slightly ill-humored fashion. Is that perhaps a sensitive subject for her? Well, I heard it was impolite to ask women about their ages...so is she old enough for that to apply?

On further thought, there's no way there'd be such a mature student in my school year. She only chose to be my classmate out of convenience in order to slip into the Rejecting Classroom. Perhaps she's already old enough that it counts as cosplay to wear a school uniform?

"Hoshino, if you're thinking rude thoughts, I'll throw you off."

Catching me red handed without even looking at me while she's driving. She's sharp!

"By the way, you learned how to drive a motorcycle during the 'School Transfers', right? If so, this isn't your bike, right? Whose is it? Your father's?"

I don't know much about motorcycles, but this one doesn't look like it was meant for a girl.

"Beats me."

"...eh?"

"Don't you think it's careless to leave a bike alone in front of a house, with the keys still in the ignition?"

Well, I think so, too, but, wait, what? So that means...

"Also, the chain was poorly-built and easily cut with some common tools. It's always the same every time I 'transfer'. Well, that part goes without saying."

Let's not ask for any more details. Ignorance is bliss. Yeah, I have no clue what she's talking about.

"But say, if you lose your memories, then your driving skills, plus the other skills and knowledge you acquired will be lost as well, right?"

That would be a real shame.

"....."

Otonashi-san doesn't respond.

"Otonashi-san?"

She still doesn't answer. Could it be—

"Do you also think it'd be a shame?"

Could it be that she didn't absorb all that knowledge and all those skills just to kill time? Even someone like Otonashi-san would regret losing all those acquired abilities, which is why she didn't want to lose her memories.

That's what I think.

In order to produce this feeling of 'regret', she kept on acquiring new skills.

Which reminds me—

Although this is a bit late, I start wondering.

—why did Otonashi-san act as if she had lost all of her memories?

In the end, she takes me to the most expensive-looking hotel in the vicinity. While it's not a five-star place, it's obviously not within a regular high school student's price range. Otonashi-san checks in with practiced ease, turns down the bellhop who offers to lead us to the room, and proceeds with determination.

After we enter her room, Otonashi-san immediately sits down on the sofa.

I sit down on the bed while suppressing the unsettled feelings I get from being in a high class hotel....actually, being alone with a girl in a hotel room would normally be quite a stunning situation. But with Otonashi-san, I'm surprised to feel zero sexual tension. Being with her is just too surreal.

"You sure are rich, Otonashi-san. That's the impression I'm getting, anyway."

"Whether I'm wealthy or not is immaterial. The money will return anyway when I 'transfer' again."

"...that's true, now that you mention it. So I'd be able to buy up all the Umaibōs in the convenience store. Awesome!"

"That doesn't matter now. We didn't come here to discuss such trifles, did we?"

"R-Right. Specifically what do you want to discuss?"

"What actions we'll take going forward. After all, I lost my focus when it turned out that you weren't the culprit."

"I'm so sorry."

"Can the sarcasm."

But I didn't inject any...

"But, well, wouldn't it be best to just find the real culprit? Don't get me wrong; I know it's not that simple, but aren't you a lot better off, now that you've lost this preoccupation with me?"

"...Hoshino. I have experienced 27,754 'School Transfers'. Are you aware of that?"

"...what do you mean?"

"I've told you some of this last time, didn't I? However overconfident I was of your guilt, it's not like I didn't suspect anyone else. I also tried to come into contact with the other suspects while starting with a blank slate...of course I was probably negligent to a certain degree, since I mistook you for the culprit."

"But you didn't find any other possible culprits besides me?"

"Yes. Keep in mind that we're on the 27,754th iteration. This means the *owner* of the *box* is a person who's been successfully concealing his identity for an immense length of time."

"Err, couldn't it be that he noticed you because you acted too boldly?"

"Even if he were wary of me, it would be impossible. We're talking about the amount of time contained within 27,754 iterations, you know? Or do you think that the owner has the fortitude and wit to continue hiding his true colors for that long? Well, to be fair, I still haven't found him.

Jeez...the owner must be someone who enters this classroom, so why can't I identify him?"

"...wait a sec. What do you mean when you said that the owner could only be someone who enters this classroom? The owner has to be one of our classmates?"

I'm reminded that in the last loop, Otonashi-san mentioned that there aren't many suspects.

"No. The teachers and the students from other classes that come to classroom 1-6 each time are suspects, too. The range of this Rejecting Classroom is, as the name implies, only the classroom of class 1-6. Only the people who entered classroom 1-6 during March 2nd and March 3rd are truly involved with this phenomenon."

.....? But I left the classroom and saw many other people, actually.

"Your face tells me that you're not getting it, Hoshino. Look, do you believe it's really possible to turn back time?"

"Eh...?"

What does she mean? If I say 'no,' then the basic concept of the Rejecting Classroom won't hold up, will it?

"...but isn't that what the box does?"

"I guess so. The box would make it possible. But I'm asking for your opinion. Can you fully believe in the power of this box to turn back time? Do you think such a phenomenon is even possible?"

I have no clue what Otonashi-san is trying to say.

"I think—"

So I just answer her question honestly without dwelling on her intentions.

"—once something has happened, it can't be undone."

Even I have thought 'If only I could turn back time' countless times in my life. But even if a time machine existed, I still wouldn't actually be able to believe in time travel. I probably wouldn't believe in it even if I actually traveled back to the past, at least until I gained absolute proof that I was in the past. And it's possible that even then, I wouldn't be able to accept it.

I don't know if that's the correct answer, but Otonashi-san nods with a "Mhm".

"Your sentiment is normal. And apparently, the creator of this Rejecting Classroom also thinks like you."

"...what do you mean?"

"A box makes the associated *wish* come true with utter completeness. Thoroughly. Flawlessly. In other words—even the culprit's doubts about traveling back in time will be reified, along with everything else bound up with his wish. You understand what this means, right?"

"Err...."

Wanting to turn back time, but not being able to believe in it. That lack of faith would probably warp the shape of the wish. I get it.

"But haven't you been traveling back in time over and over?"

"Hoshino. Did I refer to this phenomenon as 'traveling back in time' even once?"

There is no way I'd know since I've lost most of my memories of her.

"Let's put it plainly: If the Rejecting Classroom was born out of the wish to turn back time, then it's poorly made. No, it's outright defective."

"Then why did you experience over 20,000 recurrences?"

"Isn't this the very proof that it's defective? If time were perfectly reversed, then there would be no way my memories would be fortuitously excluded from this phenomenon. Not to mention, if these recurrences were so perfect, how could I slip in as a 'Transfer Student'?"

She gives me a snide glance.

"Because it's you, I bet you thought something simple like 'For Otonashi, everything is possible,' and stopped thinking at that point."

I can't object because she's totally right.

"To put it simply, all I did was get into the box. For example, I didn't choose to become a 'transfer student'. It's a position assigned to me by the culprit as he divvies up roles. The stage of the Rejecting Classroom is classroom 1-6, so I guess it was the most natural way to explain my sudden entrance; after all, we're roughly the same age. The culprit's feeling of balance preserved the consistency."

".....?"

I have no clue what Otonashi-san is saying. Why is it necessary to preserve some consistency?

"Why are you completely lacking in comprehension...anyway, to explain it simply—let's assume the Rejecting Classroom is a movie that the culprit is directing. The filming has ended, so only editing remains. But the production company insists that there's a new actor who has to appear in the movie. There's no roles left to cast anymore. But it's unreasonable to

just film this additional actor standing idly onscreen without giving him a role to play; that wouldn't be a movie anymore. So instead the director decides to modify the script as little as possible in order to give him a role. That's what I mean by 'preserving the consistency.'"

"In other words he couldn't keep you from slipping in and had to somehow integrate you. So he was forced to make you a sudden 'transfer student' in order to preserve the school life of March 2nd?"

"Yes. And that alone should make you feel that something's wrong with this Rejecting Classroom. It's too bothersome to explain each and every detail so I'll cut straight to the chase. This is not 'reality'. Nor is it a true recurrence. It's merely a small separated 'space'. It's just a clumsy wish that holds true as long the culprit himself continues to mistake it for a true time loop."

"Err...so that's why the recurrences were imperfect?"

"Exactly. The culprit, who at heart doesn't believe it's possible to turn back time, instead won't allow it to proceed. He's choosing to reject it. The owner just needs to keep deceiving himself."

"This imperfection is the reason we can retain our memories?"

"I guess so. The specific reasons we can retain our memories may differ, but there's undoubtedly a gap in the Rejecting Classroom."

But there is something I still can't understand.

"At the end of the day, who are you, Otonashi-san?"

Otonashi-san frowns. Maybe this is a question she wanted to avoid.

"Ah, no...you don't have to tell me if you don't want to..."

However, she opens her mouth, frowning all the while.

"There's no cool title for my position. I'm just a student...is what I'd like to say, but that only applied until about a year ago...My standpoint, huh? I have never come out and expressed it, but right, there's probably only one way to state it. I am—"

Otonashi-san, seeming very displeased, spits out her next few words.

"—actually a box."

"You're actually a box? What do you mean?"

When I parrot back her words because I still don't understand, Otonashi-san's frown just deepens.

"There will be various drawbacks if I explain the details, so I can't tell you."

I feel a bit unsatisfied, and this is apparently reflected by my expression. After looking at me, Otonashi-san continues.

"But I'll tell you this: I once obtained and used a box."

"Eh—!!"

"And my wish is still being granted."

Otonashi-san possesses a box?

"You're curious about my reason for seeking the box anyway, aren't you? Very well, I'll let you know. My wish was definitely granted. But at the same time, I lost everything."

"...everything?"

"My family, friends, classmates, relatives, teachers, neighbors—I lost everyone close to me because of my wish. Everyone related to me isn't...here anymore."

I am speechless.

"That's not...some kind of metaphor, is it? You're speaking literally?"

"Yes. I can't stand to leave everything in limbo. That's why I'm taking action."

She has lost everything. She has nothing left to lose. That might be why Otonashi-san can be so reckless and fearless.

Anyway, to wish for such a situation, heck, what kind of wish did she insert into her box?

"Isn't it possible to destroy the box? Wouldn't the wish be nullified that way?"

"Hoshino," Otonashi-san responds to my reflexive doubt in a strongly admonitory tone, "the box is granting my wish. Do you get it? Don't make me say more about it."

Right. There's no way Otonashi-san didn't come up with that on her own. In other words:

The box definitely took everything away from her. But even so—Otonashi-san doesn't want to abandon her wish.

When I stay silent, Otonashi-san takes the lead once more.

"My wish and the wish of the owner of the Rejecting Classroom can't coexist. His box was created that way. So they repelled each other when I slipped in and the interference against me was reduced. But that's still just a 'reduction' in resistance. Put differently, I'm not immune to the effects of

the Rejecting Classroom, either. Even I don't know the extent of its impact on me. If I gave in, I'd also be captured by the Rejecting Classroom...just as I already told you long ago, huh?"

If that's the case, how does the owner view Otonashi-san? At the very least, he's unlikely to be happy about her presence.

"You should finally understand the situation somewhat better now, so I'll return to our original topic. I guess it's not possible to retrieve the Rejecting Classroom anymore and use it. This box is already used up by the owner, so it's alright to just end the Rejecting Classroom."

"So how can we do that?"

"By ripping the box out of the owner. Alternatively, by destroying it along with the owner. That's about it. Another possibility would be...to find him, the distributor of the box, since he might be able to do something. But he's not going to be inside the box, so that doesn't seem like a viable option."

The distributor of the box?

I am about to ask her about him—and stop.

I don't remember this "*" I should have met already, and I don't want to, either.

".....so nothing will happen as long we don't find the culprit, right?"

"Oh? Nothing will happen, you say, huh? So you just implicitly complained that our conversation up until now was completely meaningless, unconstructive and a waste of time, right? You've got some nerve."

"N-No! I was just trying to confirm..."

"Hmph, so you feel that your knowledge and wit can solve a problem even I couldn't solve? I'm sure you interjected your comment with an idea in mind, right?"

"Ugh..."

I winced. There's no way I'd have one.

"Back to relevancy—if I knew that, then there would be no way for the owner to evade me. But, right...unlike the other deaths, the death of the owner won't be forgiven inside the Rejecting Classroom. For example, I died countless times inside this Rejecting Classroom but I'm here now and I haven't lost my box."

"But the owner is different?"

"Yeah, exactly. The owner and the box are connected. The instant the owner dies, the Rejecting Classroom will be destroyed. That should definitely be true, since I know of a similar case. The box will break the moment the owner dies, at the same time the characteristics of the Rejecting Classroom will be annihilated, and the concept of true death will be restored."

"So he'll stay dead if that happens...?"

"Exactly."

"So we can assume I'm not the culprit. Also, you're obviously not the culprit either."

"Well, yeah."

So Mogi-san also can't be the culprit. I mean, Mogi-san met with that accident already.

"Say, some of our classmates have disappeared, right? Does that have anything to do with death inside the box?"

"...I can't tell for sure, but there shouldn't be any connection. I still don't know why it's happening, but it's probably another characteristic of the Rejecting Classroom."

—wait!

I suddenly realize—there's a simple way to identify the culprit.

At the same time, I feel my blood drain away from my face. What am I thinking? This is just too despicable. But, but—

Aya Otonashi. She could do it.

I mustn't tell her. But why isn't Otonashi-san aware of this method? There's no way she wouldn't notice it. But she didn't use it. That means...What does that mean—?

"Hoshino."

My whole body twitches when she calls out to me.

"What are you thinking? Surely you didn't come up with a way to find the owner—"

My body twitches again.

"—so you did think of something, Hoshino?"

"Ah, no—"

"Hiding it is futile. How much time do you think I have spent together with you? I have been chasing you longer than anyone else in this world. Unwillingly, but still..."

I am aware of that. Anyone would realize that I am trying to hide something.
"——"

But there is no way I can readily tell her about that.

"Hoshino. Even you should be aware that I'm not very patient."

She isn't going to fall for a random lie. Even if I try to evade her question, I'll surely blurt out the method in the end.

But still—

"Hoshino!!"

Otonashi-san seizes me by the collar. Ah, how painful. She's serious. Well, of course she is. After all, she's endured more than 20,000 loops just to obtain the box.

"Tell me!! Tell me this method!!"

I will definitely regret it if I tell her. But can I really keep quiet in such a situation?

"...you just need to kill all of our classmates."

So I tell her.

It's simple. If you can exclude every person that has died at least once from the pool of suspects, then that's easy. You just need to kill every suspect. It's a simple and devilish solution.

But people who die here will be resurrected.

There is nothing to worry about. I couldn't ever execute such a plan, but I'm sure Otonashi-san would be able to.

After all, she even produced corpses in order to retain her memories.

But did this plan really not occur to her? Why didn't she think of killing people in order to track down the culprit, in addition to retaining her memories? And if she did come up with that ultra-effective method, why didn't she execute it when all she needed would be roughly 40 iterations?

She doesn't answer.

She doesn't show any reaction.

I slowly look at her face.

Otonashi-san is still holding me by the collar and stares at me, unblinking.

"That is—"

Otonashi-san quietly removes her hand from my collar.

"That is—not an acceptable method."

"...eh?"

"That would be like performing medical testing on a living person without consent. Of course it's the most efficient way to use a human if you want to know how people are affected. But that act should be immediately rejected as an unacceptable method."

Otonashi-san spits these words out in a low voice without looking away for a single second.

"You want to know why? That goes without saying: such an act is inhuman. The moment someone does such a thing, he isn't human anymore....yeah, I am a box, after all. Is it because of that? Is that why you are—"

Otonashi-san's eyes are unmistakably burning with anger.

"—treating me as inhuman!?"

Aah, certainly, if she did interpret my comments like that, then her anger is natural. I realize that I was speaking thoughtlessly.

But I still don't understand.

"But you've killed people to retain your memories, haven't you?"

".....what are you saying?"

Otonashi-san seems unable to endure my words and shoots me a sharp glance.

"...a-as I said, you produced extreme events that provoked strong impressions in order to retain your memories, didn't you?"

"Stop insulting me already—!! Didn't I explain it to you just now?! I can only resist the Rejecting Classroom because I am a box!"

Aah, right. That she retains her memories by producing and witnessing corpses was just Daiya's unfounded theory.

But even so, I still can't comprehend her actions.

"What's with that face? If you have something to say, spit it out already!!"

Otonashi-san seizes me by the collar once more and scowls at me again, but this time, I scowl back.

Yeah...I haven't prepared myself. I didn't really consider what it means to scowl back at her; it's a really difficult act for me to engage in.

I am completely under her control. And because I'm aware of that, that's why I'm resisting her in this way.

But I say something that snaps our tenuous bond.

"Then why did you kill me?!!"

And our ability to communicate further is destroyed.



Those words irrevocably broke our relationship.

Otonashi-san ceased speaking to me, and also stopped directing any form of expression toward me. Completely. With Otonashi-san standing before me like that, I was naturally left impotent. In the end, I had no choice but to leave the hotel.

I loiter around near the hotel, but that's just an expression of my foolish reluctance. I aimlessly while away my time. I glance at the 'borrowed' bike we rode in on and walk away. I go to the convenience store. I buy tea in a P.E.T. bottle. I drink it bit by bit. The bottle becomes empty. I notice that I can barely remember what I was drinking.

This might be the end.

Unlike Otonashi-san, I am not certain whether I can retain my memories. If she doesn't consider me necessary to her plans, I might forget everything and before I know it, I'd get spit out of the Rejecting Classroom. Then I'd vanish like a certain person did.

I can't hear any sounds on my path—there are no street lights either, nor any colors.

It's like the person who made all this didn't get around to finishing all the details.

I put the empty bottle against my mouth. I feel like I'll be swallowed if I don't act like I'm drinking something. Swallowed by what? I have no idea.

All of a sudden, the music of my favorite artist resounds on the silent road. What? ...aah, I see. That's my phone....my phone? So someone's calling me? Right. Right! I can't remember giving it to her. I can't remember giving Otonashi-san my phone number, but in some other world I might have!

I take my cell phone out of my uniform pocket.

The name 'Kokone Kirino' is displayed on the L.C.D. screen.

I look up at the sky. As if things would work out that nicely! I knew it. But I can't help having some unrealistic expectations, right?

I get my breathing under control and accept the call.

"Ah, hello...Kazu-kun."

I don't get the usual vibe from her voice, though that might just be me. Or has Kokone always acted like this over the phone? We might be intimate, but I've rarely ever talked with her on my cell before.

"Ah, err—"

I have a hunch that I can already predict this conversation.

Ah, no, I definitely know what'll happen. I just can't recall the details right now.

"Can you come by for a bit? I'll tell you where to meet me."

What was going to happen next? How did this pan out again?

"There's something I have to tell you, Kazu-kun."

3,087th time

I'm a huge Umaibō fan, but I still don't like the Teriyaki Burger flavored ones that much.

I am at the deserted park right next to her house. We are facing each other in front of the water fountain while I chew on the Umaibō she gave me.

"...How is it?"

".....Hm, err, it's not a flavor I don't like, but well..."

"...I'm not really asking about...the Umaibō."

I know that. But really, how should I respond?

"...So, will you go out with me?"

I don't have enough experience with matters of the heart to avoid getting flustered.

But she should be just about as flustered as I am. At the very least, I've never seen her like this before.

Maybe it's because of the new mascara she told me about this morning, but her eyes look even larger than normal. And those eyes are looking straight at me....there's no way I can hold such a gaze.

I don't know what to say, but I can't just keep silent, so I open my mouth.

"So...are you in love with me?"

Her face blushes crimson right before my eyes.

"...may...be"

"Maybe?"

I unintentionally parrot back her response.

".....I-It's pretty mean to ask such a question, you know? You know my answer, right?...O-Or do you want me to say it out loud?"

"Ah...!"

I finally notice my insensitivity and drop my head in shame.

"I'm...sorry."

I reflexively apologize. She looks at me with upturned eyes and murmurs.

".....I love you."

Then she pulls herself upright and says straight to my face.

"...I love you."

I can't help but avert my eyes because her face is stunningly cute. My heart is definitely beating faster—just from her display of affection.

I think she looks cute.

Her personality is bright, and there are always people gathered around her.

I also know that many guys have confessed to her, only to end up being rejected.

It'd be great to go out with her, for sure.

But—

"Sorry."

But I answer her thus—so bluntly that I almost surprise myself.

I know that turning her down is a real shame, but I just can't imagine us going out. Somehow, the notion doesn't seem realistic.

The sense of expectation vanishes from her eyes and is replaced by tears instead. Even though I know I'm entirely to blame, I can't look directly at her.

I can't say anything, because I'm sure that all I could say would be 'sorry.'

".....you hesitated quite a bit, didn't you?"

I nod in response to her murmur.

"...say...you like Umaibōs, right?"

Words without context. I nod once more.

"But you don't like the Teriyaki Burger flavor that much?"

"...yeah."

"Which flavor do you like best?"

"Err...Corn Potage, I guess?"

I have no clue why she is asking about Umaibōs, but respond awkwardly anyway.

"I see. U-huh, U-huh..."

She nods repeatedly.

"Ahaha...I failed, then."

What she says seems absolutely trivial, but for some reason, her words send a shiver down my spine. I get the eerie sensation that I'm watching a poorly edited video.

While looking up at me, she asks, "Could you possibly have accepted my confession if I'd chosen a different approach?"

I don't know—maybe? After all, I'm already wavering... No, that's not true—I know.

I would definitely turn her down.

I would definitely give her the same answer over and over, unless I were to change, or some external condition were to change.

As long as it's today, I cannot imagine myself going out with her.

Therefore, as long as it's today, there's no way I could accept her confession.

"Your face tells me that you don't know."

I have no response.

But she takes this as a 'yes' and smiles sweetly.

"Aah, okay. So I just need to keep confessing until I succeed, right?"

That may be a good idea. At least I can take a little responsibility for rejecting her feelings.

But still—you have to wait for a different day to confess, you know?

27,754th time

I am probably worn out after the complete breakdown of my relationship with Otonashi-san and the sudden call from Kokone. ...I'm really just making excuses, though.

I had entirely forgotten.

That an accident would definitely happen at this intersection.

I am safe. I instinctively remembered once I came near the intersection, due to the immense shock I suffered from dying there once. So I have no problem ensuring my own safety.

But that's just not acceptable. After all, that means someone else is going to get run over in this unavoidable accident.

I had forgotten about it. And because of that, I was too late to save that person. Even though I knew that someone would get run over, I didn't stop it. 'Because I had forgotten about it' doesn't even qualify as an excuse.

I'm horrible. It's as if I killed that person myself.

Kasumi Mogi is there.

The girl I love is there.

As always, the truck is driving toward her at breakneck speed.

I am unable to save her from where I'm currently standing. No matter how recklessly I try to rescue her, there's no way for me to do it from this far away.

She is going to get stained in blood. The girl I love is going to get stained in blood. The girl I love is going to get stained in blood because of me. The girl I love keeps getting stained in blood, over and over, and it's my responsibility, over and over, because I keep overlooking it, over and over.

"U-UAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

I run towards the truck. In order to save Mogi-san? No. Certainly not. I can't endure my feelings of guilt and just wanted to feel like I did something. It's merely self-satisfaction.

Horrible. Just how horrible am I?

Then I see it.

"Eh...?"

The girl who I thought was past all hope of being saved gets pushed out of the way.

I didn't do it.

I am too far away to reach her in time.

Thus, there is only one person who could have saved her.

The girl who continued fighting even when I abandoned my memories and acted like I didn't know her.

Even though she wouldn't make it in time to save herself.

But yet, she—

—Aya Otonashi jumped out.

Ah, right. I remember.

I've already witnessed the exact same scene countless times.

This will all repeat anyway. Even the fact that she saved someone will disappear. All that will remain is the memory of the pain she suffered while dying. The fear of encountering death. The despair that emerges from knowing that she will have to repeat that experience.

And yet, Aya Otonashi jumped in the front of the truck. In order to save someone else from getting run over.

Over and over. Many thousands of times.

Right.

How could I forget?

There's a loud crashing sound, but the truck just smashes through the wall with a huge roar. I approach Otonashi-san while still half-overwhelmed by the noise. Mogi-san is lying next to her, completely frozen. Apparently she's suffered quite a shock.

I look at Otonashi-san.

Her left leg is bent the wrong way.

She is covered with a cold sweat, but speaks with such resolution that she seems completely uninjured.

"Last time, I killed you."

Although speaking should be painful, her voice is clear.

"I thought everything would end by killing the *owner*. I didn't want to do it. But at the time I believed that it was the only way to escape the Rejecting Classroom. I was willing to throw away my humanity. I don't want to admit it, but I didn't mind back then. I thought that the shame I brought upon myself would also get reset and disappear after I escaped from the Rejecting Classroom."

I finally understand why at the beginning of this loop, Otonashi-san acted as if she forgot everything.

She couldn't forgive herself.

For accepting my death when I got killed in that accident.

She was so repentant that she was about to abandon her escape from the Rejecting Classroom and the *box* she was so fixated upon.

'Then why did you kill me?!'

So very regretful that she wasn't able to object to these words.

Just how cruel have I been?

And those words weren't even true.

Last time around, I jumped out to save Mogi-san and died in the accident. I thought it was Otonashi-san's fault, just like I always thought Mogi-san's death was Otonashi-san's fault.

Because of my biased views, I blurted out something like 'You killed me'. I should have noticed this misunderstanding the moment she renounced the act of murder. In truth, she was merely unable to save me.

For some reason, this accident always occurs. Someone gets run over for certain. It's just pure coincidence that I was the one to die that time.

"Hmph, I can only laugh at my own stupidity. Guilt doesn't just disappear through forgetfulness. And to top it off, the Rejecting Classroom did not end and I now have to cope with having become a shadow of my former self. I can't think of a situation where the word 'retribution' would apply any better."

As she says this, Otonashi-san coughs up some blood.

"Otonashi-san, don't speak if it hurts..."

"When will there be another chance to talk? I've already become accustomed to this level of pain. This is nothing. It's just momentary pain, so it's much better than slowly but surely getting eaten away by a disease."

You don't "become accustomed to" something like that!

"I didn't lose my memories, nor did I escape from the Rejecting Classroom. Fufu... I probably knew deep down...that I wouldn't be released from the Rejecting Classroom."

"...why?"

"It's simple. My tenacity won't release me that easily."

Otonashi-san stands up while tottering back and forth. She could have just stayed lying down, but I guess she can't stand to have me look down at her.

Her left leg is completely ruined. Otonashi-san coughs violently and blood flies forth. But she then stands upright using the wall for support and looks at me.

Probably because Otonashi-san got up, Mogi-san escapes from her expressionlessly petrified state and starts to move as well. She then timidly looks at me.

"Are you alright, Mogi-san?"

".....!!" a delayed shriek escapes from her mouth.

"W-What were you talking about... just now...? Mhm, not just now, since yesterday... what are you two?"

...what? Who are you looking at with those eyes? Who are you looking at with those fearful eyes?

...I know. Her glance is directed at me.

For some reason, I'm unable to leave her alone. Without thinking, I reach out to touch her cheek.

"D-Don't touch me!"

Aah...you're right. What am I doing? Why am I reaching out toward her, even though I'm the one who terrifies her? Did I think that it would soothe her? How could I even think for a moment that I'd be able to make her calm down? ...There's no way I'd be able to.

"...what... are you...?"

I clench my fist. I can't explain anything to her. Thus, I have no choice but to endure her stare.

I'd love to explain the entire situation right now. Maybe she would even understand it.

But—I mustn't do so.

After all I have to fight. I have to fight against the Rejecting Classroom.

And for the sake of that fight I have to refuse the fake everyday life produced by the Rejecting Classroom.

I came to that determination when I took Otonashi-san's hand back then. So I reject it. The smile Mogi-san once gave me, her blushing face, letting me sleep on her lap—I reject all of that.

Mogi-san gives up on trying to understand what's going on when I refuse to break my silence, and she fearfully stands up.

She staggers backwards on shaky legs, begging us with her eyes to not chase after her. Then, she escapes.

I stare at her as she flees.

And make sure I don't avert my gaze.

Because this is supposed to be the outcome I desire.

"—I now grasp how determined you are," Otonashi-san says after observing our interaction. She's still leaning against the wall. "Thus, I came to a resolution as well. I shall give up on my goal of obtaining the box."

"...eh?"

This troubles me. This definitely troubles me. I need Otonashi-san's power. Without thinking, I open my mouth to try to stop her.

Just as I do so...

"—Therefore, I shall lend you a hand."

"...eh?"

I didn't expect that.

Lend me a hand? Aya Otonashi-san will lend me a hand?

"Why are you gawking like a gibbering idiot? I just said that I'll lend you a hand. Are you deaf?"

But this is as impossible as the sun coming up in the west and setting in the east.

"I lost my way. Your criticism was spot-on—by killing you, I became sub-human. No, even worse. I am a coward who abandoned my own goal and tried to run away because I didn't want to admit it. To put it plainly, I gave in to the Rejecting Classroom. And I continued to run away while telling myself that there's nothing left to do for someone like me who's merely a defeated box."

Although she is abasing herself, there is still fire in her eyes. I actually feel a bit relieved.

"But there's no reason to waver. I definitely did something to be ashamed of, but that's no reason to draw in my horns. Nothing will come from empty regrets. Therefore I won't run away anymore. So—"

She shuts her mouth, reluctant to finish her sentence.

But since I am almost scowling at her, she opens her mouth and states.

"So please—forgive me."

Aah, I see. That's what she meant.

This weird speech was supposed to be an apology to me.

Her entreaty is completely meaningless.

"I can't forgive you."

Upon hearing my blunt words, Otonashi-san looks momentarily surprised, but then her serious face returns right away.

"I see... getting killed is definitely something you can't forgive. I understand."

"That's not it."

Otonashi-san frowns, failing to comprehend my words.

"What I mean is...I don't know what there is to forgive anyway."

Right. It's not like I won't forgive her. I just can't forgive her. Because nothing needs to be forgiven to begin with.

"...Hoshino, what are you saying? I..."

"You killed me?"

"...Right."

"Are you kidding?"

I smile spontaneously.

"I am here!"

Right. This is plain and obvious.

"I am right here, Otonashi-san."

However much responsibility she may feel, she didn't do anything that can't be undone.

I don't understand why she's feeling so much responsibility anyway. She is not the creator of the Rejecting Classroom after all. Otonashi-san just got involved in it—

—no, that's not correct.

Otonashi-san isn't just a victim. She is a ruler who grasped our personalities and analyzed all of our behavioral patterns. She knows how the ripples in the pool will expand by throwing a stone in a particular place. She is a ruler of at least the same degree of power as the creator of the Rejecting Classroom himself.

But because of this power, she feels responsible for the events that occur. Because she thinks that bad things could be prevented if she acts properly.

Therefore, since she couldn't, and didn't, prevent someone's death, she feels like she's the killer.

But Otonashi-san said it herself. Death within the Rejecting Classroom is just a show.

"I really don't mind. But if you insist, how about using a certain magic word?"

Otonashi-san freezes with a frown on her face. After a few moments, she finally moves again and looks downward.

"Heh..."

Her shoulders tremble. Eh? What? What does that mean? I get nervous and sneak a peek at her.

"Hehe...haha...HAHAHAHAHAHA!!"

—She's laughing! On top of that it's some really explosive laughter!!

"H-Hey! Why are you laughing? Sorry, but I don't get it!?"

Otonashi-san continues laughing out loud for a while, my protests notwithstanding.

Geez... what's this about? I'm actually confident that I said something 'cool,' but it seems that my words are no more than a laughing matter in the end...

Otonashi-san finally stops laughing, returns to her usual gallant expression and speaks to me with pursed lips.

"I have experienced 27754 *school transfers*."

"...I know that well."

"I was convinced that I had grasped your behavioral patterns completely by now. But I couldn't predict your statement just now at all. Can you imagine

how amusing this is for someone accustomed to eternal boredom?" she says, looking delighted.

I still can't grasp her intentions and incline my head.

"Hoshino. You're truly amusing. I haven't met anyone like you before. At first glance you look like an ordinary person with no special beliefs, but actually there's no one who is more attached to everyday life than you. For exactly this reason you're able to clearly distinguish this fake everyday life from the real one-even better than I can."

Better than Otonashi-san?

"That's not true. I can't distinguish it clearly at all. After all, my heart hurts when the accident happens, even though I know it's going to be reset..."

"Of course. That has nothing to do with your special trait. For example, when you watch a movie or read a book, you also feel discomfort when the characters experience misfortune, don't you? It's the same here."

Is it really like that? I wonder.

"—Hoshino."

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

It's so sudden, I don't understand what she's apologizing for. Before I know it, the delight has disappeared from her face.

"Really, I'm ashamed of my own impotence. I'm sorry."

"I-It's alright..."

I just feel uncomfortable when someone so obviously my superior apologizes earnestly to me. I falter as if she were criticizing me. I'm really pathetic.

"That was just a simple apology, but you're okay with that, right? I just have to continue to understand you, grasp your motivations, and direct you. This is what you desire from me, right?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"Apologizing, huh? It's certainly necessary, but I feel like I haven't done it in years."

...I'm sure she really hasn't.

"Well then, it's time."

"Time?"

"For the end of the 27,754th *school transfer*. And the beginning of the 27,755th one."

"Aah, I see."

I accept this strange phenomenon with surprising calm.

I look around and see that people have gathered about because of the accident. Many among them are wearing very familiar uniforms. Kokone is present and is watching us. Otonashi-san and I have been talking with each other while ignoring everyone else. Well, I guess I can understand why Mogi-san was so scared. A casual chat between me and a blood-stained Otonashi-san must certainly appear disturbing.

I offer my hand to Otonashi-san.

Without hesitation, she takes this hand; the same hand that someone else has refused.

My heart gets crushed by an overwhelming power, like it's being squashed by a vise. The sky starts to close like a coin purse. Despite being closed, the world turns white. White. White. The ground becomes unstable and tastes sugary for some reason—not on the tongue, but on the skin. That sensation doesn't feel bad, yet it feels disgusting. Finally, I understand that this event marks the end of the 27,754th iteration.

We are surrounded by soft, sweet and pure white despair

0th time

I only grasped the literal truth of 'love can change the world' when I was sixteen.

How many times have I already thought that life is just too tedious to bear, with its endless repetition of habits and habits and habits? I've seriously considered ending my life so many times—I couldn't possibly count them if I used both of my hands, or even if I used both of my feet as well.

I was horribly bored.

But I never gave voice to my feelings, and always behaved cheerfully. After all, it won't do you any good if you openly display such a negative attitude for everyone to see. I tried to be on good terms with everyone, which isn't all that difficult. If you avoid thinking deeply about strong points and weak points or likes and dislikes, you can get along with everyone.

A number of people gathered around me, and they all told me the same thing.

"You're always so cheerful. You sure are worry-free, right?"

Ah, yes. Everyone, thank you so much for being completely deceived. Thank you so much for being ignorant of my ugliness until now. Thanks to you, I've come to want to throw everything away.

I think I know when this boredom began.

Each and every person is just too self-centered.

When I exchanged email addresses with a boy and replied regularly to his emails, he got all excited and confessed to me without any encouragement on my part. When I tried to avoid ignoring a boy who was being snubbed by the other girls, he mistook it for affection on my part and confessed to me. When someone invited me to go see a movie and I only accepted because it was impolite to turn him down, he confessed to me. When I went home together with someone several times because we happened to live in the same direction, he confessed to me.

Afterwards, they all made faces as if I were betraying them, even though they only had themselves to blame, and ended up resenting me. I was also resented by the girls who were in love with those boys. Selfish. Self-centered. I was hurt every time and became covered with scars. Eventually, I didn't even notice the new scars forming when I got hurt anymore. That's when I finally noticed—

I'd just need to associate with each and every person halfheartedly without ever getting too involved. I'd just need to read the mood properly and converse shallowly. I would not show them my true self. I would just need to close up my shell in order to protect my delicate interior.

And then I became bored.

Even when I only showed them my outer shell, no one noticed any difference.

They all said the same thing to me.

"You're always so cheerful. You sure are worry-free, right?"

What a wonderful success.

You should all just disappear.

It was an ordinary day after school. As always, I was smiling while making casual chit-chat with the strangers around me who pretended to be friends. Then, all of a sudden, without any special impetus—

I was struck by a certain concept that suddenly gained shape, and made me think of a certain word.

'Solitude'

Aah, I was completely—alone.

Alone. I see, so I was alone. Despite being surrounded by people, I was alone. I felt strangely pleased. This word fit perfectly.

But this word promptly bared its fangs and attacked me. It was the first time I realized that such utter solitude was accompanied by pain. My chest hurt, I couldn't breathe. And even when I was finally able to take a breath, it felt as if the air were full of needles. Pain pierced my lungs. My sight turned black for a moment, and I thought that my life might as well be over. But my sight returned right away and life didn't end so easily. I didn't know what to do. I don't know. Help me. Someone, help me.

"What's the matter?"

Somebody had noticed my difficulties and said to me:

"You look very happy smiling like that."

Eh?

I'm smiling—?

I raised my hands to my cheeks because I couldn't understand his words.

The corners of my lips were certainly lifted.

"Really, you're always so cheerful. You sure are worry-free, right?"

I laughed out loud. "Yeah, I'm happy!" I laughed. I laughed without even knowing why.

At that moment, the people around me gradually became transparent. One by one they turned transparent. They turned transparent and disappeared, so I couldn't see them anymore. Some voices continued to address me, but I couldn't hear them anymore. Yet somehow I was still able to reply properly. I didn't get it.

Before I knew it, the classroom was empty. I was the only one left.

But I'm sure I was the one who made it empty.

I rejected everyone.

"I have an appointment, so I'll go now."

Although I couldn't see anyone, I spoke with a smile and picked up my bag. My relationship with everyone else probably didn't require me to specifically address anyone. I should have just spoken to the wall from the start if that's how it was.

And yet, why?

"...Excuse me, but are you alright?"

Although there should have been no one there, for some reason I could clearly hear those words. I had just passed the school gates when I was brought back in a flash, and everything became visible once more.

When I turned around, I saw a boy from my class standing there, all out of breath. Apparently, he'd been chasing after me.

His name was definitely Kazuki Hoshino. We weren't intimate, nor was he special in any way – all I knew about him was his name.

"What do you mean?"

As I asked that question, I realized that a strange expectation had enveloped me.

After all, he wouldn't ask whether I'm 'alright' unless he noticed something was wrong. It meant that he might have been able to sense my transformation—something impossible even for the people who were near me and interacting with me at the time.

"Err... how should I put it? You looked very 'distant'... or, I'm not sure, but it seemed like you weren't part of everyday life..."

He spoke with great difficulty and couldn't get to the point at all.

"Err... never mind if I was just reading too much into things. Sorry for saying such strange things."

He seemed to feel awkward and was about to leave.

"...wait a moment."

I kept him from leaving. He inclined his head slightly and looked at me.

"E-err..."

I might have stopped him, but what should I say now?

But hey—he was able to describe me as 'distant', even though I was smiling in that lonesome classroom.

"...do I always look cheerful?"

If he responded like everyone else, then he'd be just like everyone else.

Ah, I had great expectations of him. I had enormous expectations that he would deny my statement and truly understand me.

"Yeah. Well...you do look that way," he hesitantly responded.

Upon hearing those words, I became utterly disenchanted with him, lost all my interest and immediately started to hate him. I was surprised by the strength of the pendulum-like reversal of my feelings, but I had probably set my expectations far too high.

But that boy who I now hated added the following words:

"You're really trying hard, aren't you?"

My feelings swung like a pendulum once more and my hatred was inverted once again. My face couldn't keep up with the sudden shifts—but my heart felt strangely warm.

Trying hard. Trying hard to look cheerful.

That's correct. Even more correct than denying that I looked cheerful.

And so I—fell in love.

I'm aware that I'm just making a convenient assumption. Just because he said that I was trying hard doesn't mean that he truly understands me. I'm aware of that. But even so – that assumption is constantly on my mind.

At first, I thought this would just be a temporary feeling. But it soon grew to the point where it couldn't be reversed. My feelings for him were piling up, like

a winter snowdrift that never melts away, until they completely covered my heart. Despite being aware that he might become the world to me if things proceeded in this manner, for some reason I didn't mind it at all.

After all, Kazuki Hoshino rescued me from that lonesome classroom and dispelled my boredom.

If he vanished from my heart, I was sure that I'd return to that wasteland.

I'd return to that lonesome classroom where I was all alone.

My world had been changed so easily. That I had been bored seemed like a lie. I felt as if my emotions had been plugged into a powerful amplifier. Now, just greeting him makes me happy. At the same time, I feel sad that I can do barely more than greet him. I get happy when I talk to him. I get sad because I can only talk with him for a little bit. My heart feels itchy and kind of broken—yet I'm somehow content.

Yeah! I'll get on good terms with you without fail!

First, I'd like to start calling each other by our first names.^[1]

—————.....

"Do you have a wish?"

He seems to exist everywhere, but does not exist anywhere. He seems to resemble everyone, but he doesn't resemble anyone. I can't even tell if the person speaking to me is male or female.

A wish?

Of course I have one.

"This is a 'box' that grants any wish."

I accept it with my blood-stained hands.

I immediately understand that this is the real thing. Therefore, I am determined not to relinquish this box.

It'd be the same for anyone, wouldn't it? I don't believe that there's anyone who would give up such a treasure.

So I make a wish.

While knowing it's impossible, I make a wish with all my heart.

"—I don't want to have any—regrets."

27,755th time[edit]

"Come on, isn't there something different about me today? Isn't there?"

Kokone walks up to me looking the same as always. She's already asked me this question at some point in the past. What's the right answer again?

"...you've applied mascara."

"Ooh! Thumbs up, Kazu-kun!"

Seems like I was right.

"...so, how is it?"

"Yeah, you look cute," I say without hesitation. Once again, it's the correct answer. I wasn't being too serious, but Kokone is satisfied once she hears the word 'cute' and nods with a smile.

"Mhm, mhm. I see, you have great prospects. Hey, you—lad with a twisted personality! You ought to follow his example."

She folds her arms with contentment and turns her head toward Daiya.

"I'd rather bite off that tongue than say that."

"Ah, the entire world would breathe a sigh of relief. Please proceed."

"No, not my tongue—I'm talking about yours."

"Haha! So you desire an intense deep kiss with me? Please don't get carried away by your fascination for me~"

With no awareness of the situation I'm in, both of them start insulting each other at light speed like always.

Shortly thereafter, Daiya brings up the matter of the transfer student.

Please come soon, Otonashi-san.



"I'm Aya Otonashi. I have no interest in anyone but Kazuki Hoshino and the *owner*."

The classroom gets noisy at this point.

Umm, Otonashi-san? You're a transfer student, so sure, you can distance yourself from your classmates on your first day. But I've been in this class for almost a year, so it doesn't work like that for me, you know?

"What does she mean by 'the owner'? Who's the possession? Does she mean 'the person that possesses Hoshino'?"

"Isn't that simply his 'girlfriend'?"

"Which means that Kazuki-kun has a 'girlfriend' and the transfer student Otonashi-san is searching for her? Why?"

"I guess there was something between him and Otonashi-san. Maybe they're going out... so he's two-timing them?!"

"Exactly! That's it without fail! That version seems funnier, so let's go with it!"

"So while having complex feelings of love and hate for Hoshino, she's chased after him and transferred to our school. I'm sure that's it."

"Which means Hoshino has... seduced such a beauty?! Damn it!!"

Our classmates carry on as they please while ignoring us, the actual parties involved. Where the heck do they get these ideas?

"So, Hoshino actually... only toyed with me..."

"What?! You were the other one?!"

"No... I was probably just an extra... the third, no, there must have been more."

"Wha...that bastard!"

Kokone pretends to cry while Daiya uses this opportunity to raise his voice in a way that he normally wouldn't. Geez, why do those two only cooperate at times like these...

"...How bothersome," Otonashi-san murmurs. "Thanks to you, they got even more interested in me rather than being put off."

Err... how is that my fault?



Right after the first lesson, Otonashi-san and I rush out of the classroom. While some of my classmates naturally cheer me on, I also sense some bloodthirsty glances from some of the guys—but there's no time to worry about stuff like that.

We arrive at our usual spot—the back of the school building.

We won't bother to attend class anymore.

"I see. Working with you means that I automatically get dragged into your relationship network. Jeez... that's impractical."

No, I'm pretty sure the problem is what you said to them.

"But it's the first time within these 27,755 iterations that rejecting them has had a negative effect. This is truly amusing!"

"Umm, I don't know if you should find this amusing..."

"Don't be like that. Even to me new experiences are kind of exciting. Also, the circumstances have shifted a lot just because we started working together. That's a welcome change."

"What do you mean?"

"There may be a new clue that I didn't pick up on while I was alone."

From that perspective, it's definitely worth it to cooperate, but...well...

Surprisingly, she may be right. After all, she doesn't know how class 1-6 functioned before today. She can't compare today with previous days. For example, she doesn't know that my love for Mogi-san evolved between today and yesterday—in other words, during the Rejecting Classroom.

"But what should we do now, specifically?"

"...about that, Kazuki. I mulled it over and arrived at the conclusion that you may still be the key to the Rejecting Classroom."

"Eh? So you're still suspicious of me?"

"That's not it. Let me ask you: how are you able to retain your memories?"

"Eh... who knows?"

"It's a mystery, isn't it? Sure, I can sense certain differences between you and the others, but isn't it still strange that you're the only one who can retain his memories?"

"Well... of course."

"Thus, I assume that your ability is also driven by the goals of the owner."

"E..rr...?"

"You're dull as always. In other words, it might also be in the interest of the owner that you keep your memories."

It's a goal of the Rejecting Classroom that I keep my memories?

"That's not possible. I don't always retain my memories, do I? If it weren't for you, I probably would have kept losing my memories like everyone else."

"Indeed, you can say that's the flaw in my hypothesis. However, it's possible that your memory retention is just as corrupt as this world's reproduction of the past. You could explain that behavior if you consider this contradiction: the past cannot be perfectly reproduced if you retain your memories."

That might indeed be possible. But for some reason it doesn't make sense to me.

"In the first place, what meaning is there in letting me retain my memories?"

"How should I know?" she bluntly answers. "But I know what feeling moves people the most."

"What?"

Otonashi-san looks deep into my eyes and speaks.

"Love."

"...'love'...?"

The fearsome look on her face keeps me from linking that word with its meaning right away. Aah, *love*?

"Otonashi-san, that was quite cute of you."

Otonashi-san gazes at me with cold eyes.

"What is? Sufficiently intense love doesn't differ from hatred in any way."

"The same as hatred?" I'm taken aback. "...t-they're completely different!"

"They're the same. ...No, they *are* certainly different. Love's a worse feeling than hatred because people aren't aware of its filthiness. It's just repulsive."

Repulsive, huh...

"That doesn't matter now. Kazuki, is there anyone who comes to mind?"

"You mean someone who's in love with me, right? No way, there—"

I am about to say there's no one like that, when I suddenly remember.

There is one person.

If she wasn't joking when she confessed to me over the phone—there is one candidate.

"Looks like you thought of someone."

"....."

"What is it?"

"...err, well. The girl that's in love with me doesn't necessarily have to be the culprit, right?"

"Of course not. This piece of evidence alone is far from enough to conclude whether that person is the culprit or not. However, there is no reason not to investigate this possibility."

"No... well... there's no way she could be the culprit."

"What makes you so sure that she isn't the owner?"

I simply don't want her to be the culprit. I'm aware of that.

"We have an unlimited amount of time as long as we're inside the Rejecting Classroom. We shall take every opportunity to get closer to the owner."

"...but so far you haven't been successful using that method, right?"

"You're quite offensive today, huh? But you are correct. However, we have the new clue that your ability to retain memories is part of the designs of the owner. I have never investigated with that in mind before. We might be able to obtain new information this way."

"But—"

"Shouldn't you want to clear her all the more because she's someone you want to trust?"

Right. Otonashi-san is spot-on.

I must have my doubts about that person as well, which makes me not want to investigate her.

".....I got it. I'll help you."

"You shouldn't just help me; rather, you should take the lead."

She's right. I'm the one who wants to escape from the Rejecting Classroom.

...Still... something has been bothering me rather strongly for a while now. Something feels off.

"Well then, let's go."

"W-Wait a sec!"

"Why are you wavering?! My patience is beginning to wear thin, you know!"

What is it that bothers m— ah, I see.

When I recognize the source of this strange feeling, my ears start to burn.

"Mh? What's wrong, Kazuki? Your face is all red."

"Ah, no, it's just, you're—"

Why did she start calling me 'Kazuki' instead of 'Hoshino'?

"What? What are you talking about? ...Hey, why is your face getting even redder?"

"...S-Sorry. Never mind."

When did she start calling me by my first name? Not even my parents address me that way. ^[1]

I guess my face is turning even redder now.

"...? ...Okay, I guess? Anyhow, let's get going."

'Otonashi-san' turns her back to me and starts walking.

"Y-Yeah..."

Should I respond by calling her something other than 'Otonashi-san' as well? If I followed her example, I would have to call her... 'Aya'?

...Nonono!! I can't! I can't! That's out of question!!

Make that 'Aya-san' at least... no, that's still unacceptable. But 'Otonashi-san' is too reserved. I should use something that's easier to say and a bit more casual.

"Ah..."

One possibility comes to mind. It's also quite embarrassing to say, but since I've used that name several times already, it should work.

".....Maria."

When I murmur this name in a low tone, 'Otonashi-san' stops and turns around. Her eyes are wide open.

"Uwa! S-Sorry!!" I apologize instinctively after witnessing her unexpectedly sharp reaction.

"...Why are you apologizing? You just surprised me a little."

"...So you're not angry?"

"Why should I be angry? Call me whatever you like."

"I, I see..."

Otonashi-sa... no, 'Maria's' mouth relaxes.

"But still, you chose Maria of all things... Heh."

"Ah, well... if you don't like it..."

"I don't mind. I just affirmed something once more."

"Err... what did you affirm?"

For some reason, Maria smiles gently.

"That you, Kazuki, are an amusing fellow."



I am rummaging through something.

We've returned to the classroom, and now I am rummaging through the belongings of the girl who seems to be fond of me.

Of course I'm not doing it because I want to, and I also feel extremely sleazy.

Her class is in P.E. at the moment. Maria decided that instead of speaking to her directly, we should use this opportunity to search her belongings for clues.

Since I've silently come to the same conclusion, I obeyed her while feeling sleazy nonetheless.

By the way, this search is only likely to yield fruit if I'm the one doing it. Maria has already searched through everyone's belongings several times. Judging by the current state of affairs, she hasn't found anything useful yet, which is fair enough. Maria won't pick up on any potentially significant changes since she's only known us for a single day.

"Huu..."

The girl has used clean and colorful lines to bring some structure to her textbooks. Her notes are neatly written with small and rounded letters. And she has also used lots of colors here. At the left edge of one page is a drawing of a cat. And there's another drawing on the next page in the same spot. The same cat on the next page... at that point I realize this is meant to be a flip book. When I try flipping through it, the cat flies away on a rocket that it has built from a tin can. I start smiling before Maria's scowls rein me in.

All in all, I find a lot of girlish things. The colors of her belongings are generally pink or white. Her iPod is filled with J-Pop. Her wallet isn't inside her bag, so she's probably carrying it around with her.

"Oh!"

I find a neatly decorated cell phone- a treasure trove of personal information.

I've been hoping to find some clues, but the cell phone is locked so I can't dig any deeper. ...on the other hand, I'm relieved that I can't do so.

I check out the makeup pouch next to the pink hand mirror. This should be the foundation, this is the colored lipstick, this is the eyeliner, these are the scissors that she uses to trim her eyebrows, and finally an object that seems quite new... mascara, I guess.

"__"

Oh?

Something's strange.

"Did you find anything, Kazuki?"

".....I don't know yet..."

I rummage through the contents of the makeup pouch once more. I don't think there's anything special in there.

"Maria, does anything in this makeup pouch catch your eye?"

"No? I've searched through it already before, but I didn't find anything special—"

Her face freezes in the middle of her sentence.

"—wait, that can't be. She shouldn't have that item. There's no way I failed to notice it over these 27,755 loops. But... as a matter of fact—"

"Eh? Did you find something?"

"...Kazuki. After seeing this, you should have felt something."

"...eh? ...mhh, well, I thought that using makeup doesn't really fit her image."

"Good grief!"

Maria contorts her face bitterly.

I go on searching the bag for further clues. Inside it, I feel something familiar and take it out.

"Ah—"

They're getting triggered...

When I see the familiar wrappers, my memories resurface.

"Could you possibly have accepted my confession if I'd chosen a different approach?"

"Aah, okay. So I just need to continue confessing until I succeed, right?"

No way.

No way.

No way.

I won't believe such nonsense.

This is just a coincidence. It has to be a mere coincidence, but the memories that surface in my mind are way too ridiculous to be a product of my imagination—

"—Maria, what's your favorite food?"

"...Why are you talking about that right now? " Maria looks at me and frowns. "...Hey, what's wrong, Kazuki? You don't look good!"

"...You know, my favorite snack is Umaibō."

I reveal the object that I've just removed from the bag.

It's an Umaibō package.

"I especially like the Corn Potage flavor. But I haven't told anyone because no one cares. I often eat Umaibō in the classroom, I'm quite unfaithful, so to speak, when it comes to flavor, and eat different ones all the time. No one should know that I like Corn Potage flavored Umaibō the most!"

"But you don't like the Teriyaki Burger flavor that much?"

"Which flavor do you like best?"

I pray that I'm just mistaken and look at the snack package again.

No matter how many times I look at it, nothing changes.

It's not Teriyaki Burger flavored. It's a Corn Potage flavored Umaibō.

The memories that have resurfaced are screaming at me.

Even if it's just coincidence that she has a Corn Potage flavored Umaibō in her bag—the images from my just-retrieved memories are undeniable.

She is—the owner.

"Kazuki."

Maria firmly grips my shoulders. Her nails bite into my flesh and bring me back to reality.

"She is definitely the owner. We've finally arrived at our goal... well, not quite."

After Maria spits out these words with great bitterness, I ask, "What do you mean?"

"Someone who makes such a stupid mistake could never have deceived me for 27,755 'School Transfers'."

"But Maria, you have to admit that you didn't know who the owner was, right?"

"That's not true. I probably discovered her identity several times already, but I couldn't retain the knowledge that she's the owner."

"Eh? Why not?"

"I can't say for sure, but I'm guessing that's another function of the Rejecting Classroom. It would make sense. The Rejecting Classroom works as long the owner herself believes that she's inside an unchanging loop. But if someone knew that she's the owner, this prerequisite would crumble away. Hence, as soon someone discovers that she's the owner, that memory gets erased."

"...But we know who the owner is this time."

"Certainly. But that's no cause to rejoice," Maria says in a vexed tone. "If we don't do something about it this time, we're going to lose this clue yet again."

I see. Unless we defeat the owner during this round, we will forget everything we found out during this iteration and begin our search for the culprit from scratch once more.

Maria is clearly annoyed and chews on her lips. Having only one chance to accomplish something might be very irritating, since she's gotten so used to being able to redo everything.

"...But Maria, life's a contest decided by a single round, isn't it? No matter how small the matter is, there's no reset button to return to the last save point."

I'm pretty fond of that line myself, but Maria stares at me with cold eyes.

"What's this misdirected encouragement supposed to achieve?"

She even sighs.

"S-Sorry... you just looked a little irritated."

Upon hearing my apology, Maria relaxes a tiny bit.

"Yeah, I sure am. But not because our situation is unfavorable."

"...but rather?"

"Don't you get it? Although I repeatedly discovered that she's the owner, the Rejecting Classroom has not ended yet. Don't you get what that means?"

I tilt my head.

I don't know if it's directed against me, the culprit or herself, but Maria then spits out some words with great irritation:

"I've lost to the owner many times already."



"Kokone."

"Oh, the master of love, Kazuki Hoshino, has finally arrived!"

As always, Kokone is jokingly teasing me.

It's lunch break at the moment. Maria and I ended up skipping all of our morning classes together, so everyone started teasing us. But thanks to Maria's complete silence, our classmates gave up on teasing us very quickly. Their curious glances are still focused on us though. Well, that's only to be expected.

"Listen, Kokone. To tell you the truth—"

I stop myself. Because Kokone's face has shifted from soft to serious, and she's tugging me by my sleeves.

After taking a peek at Maria, Kokone leads me out of the classroom.

"Kazu-kun, please don't evade my question and give me an honest answer instead."

Right beside the door, Kokone lets go of my sleeve and continues speaking.

"What's the nature of your relationship with Otonashi-san?"

"...Why do you ask?"

I say, despite already knowing the answer. Kokone drops her gaze, and fails to reply.

"I can't describe my relationship with Maria very easily."

Kokone remains quiet, still staring at the ground.

"But I love someone other than Otonashi-san."

Kokone widens her eyes when she hears my words and looks at me.

"So—"

But Kokone doesn't say anything else. She does shift her gaze—which I pick up on right away.

She peers into the classroom and searches for someone.

Her eyes stop moving.

And they are focused on—Kasumi Mogi.

As of March 1st I haven't fallen in love with Mogi-san yet. And during this iteration, the 27,755th, I haven't come in contact with her in any way.

"Kokone, to tell you the truth, there's something I'd like you to do. That is—"

"Yeah. You don't have to say it. I think our conversation up till now has clarified everything for me," Kokone says with a smile. "The cooking room after school—does that work for you? I'll tell you everything then and there!"

Why the cooking room, I wonder for a moment—but right, Kokone is a member of the home economics club.

"We'll probably be the only ones there today."

When I nod, she looks at me again. I can't guess at the thoughts hidden behind her face.

"Kazuki."

Maria, who has been watching us from beyond the door, calls out to me. That's probably the sign for me to back off.

I tell Kokone "later," and am about to turn around.

"Ah, wait a sec!"

Kokone stops me. I stop moving and look at her again.

"Um, can I ask? Ah, but you don't have to answer of course..."

"What is it?"

"Who is the person you love, Kazu-kun?"

I answer on the spot.

"Mogi-san!"

Kokone was smiling.



We missed this exceptional chance.

The cooking room is stained in blood.

"Kazu-kun."

"...W-why—"

Covered in blood, Mogi-san looks at me. She's as expressionless as always. But I notice a light that flickers in her eyes and condemns me.

[illegible]

I don't want to hear that. I just want to cover my ears. But I can't even do that. I lost control over my body as soon as I saw Mogi-san's blood-stained body. Her words invade my ears. I desperately try to avoid grasping the meaning of those words. But it's futile—the words overwhelm me like an avalanche, they descend upon me and cover my paralyzed body.

She is speaking the words that condemn me.

"Die!"

27,755th time

"This may be a bit overdue, but I noticed that I no longer need you."

She tilts her head. Maybe this is all happening too quickly for her.

"Actually, I noticed long ago that you are a hindrance, you know? But I didn't want to be cruel. After all, we were originally 'friends'."

But we are not friends anymore.

I guess she still considers me a 'friend'. Until yesterday, we were so close that we would discuss the trials and tribulations of each other's love lives. But now that I have changed, I can't think like that anymore. Therefore, we are no longer 'friends'.

But I'm not entirely to blame here: no matter how I treat her, she is incapable of retaining any doubts about me. Even when I speak to her completely differently than I did before, she's incapable of noticing.

—Nobody can disturb my transformation.

That is the rule of this world.

Let us assume that, in the normal world, I change while others stay the same. She thinks of me as a friend. So if I change, she perceives it as something unusual. That alone already restricts my freedom to transform myself. It's similar to the reaction that people would have toward someone who suddenly dyed his hair blond during summer vacation. My options would be limited when I'm placed in an environment where I cannot freely evolve.

In that case, I would not be able to achieve my one and only wish, 'spending today with no regrets'.

That is why this convenient rule exists.

Right. This world was created solely for my convenience.

And yet—

And yet... what? I cannot think of what lies ahead.

I get the feeling that I must not think about that subject.

So I bring up another subject instead.

"Don't you think that 'love' is like spilling soy sauce on a white dress?"

She doesn't seem to understand my metaphor and tilts her head quizzically.

"Let's say you spilled soy sauce on your white dress, okay? Well, try to wipe it off: the dress will still be stained. Those stains are eternal. Thus, you will always remember 'aah, I spilled soy sauce there...' whenever you see them. There is no way you can forget about it since the stains remain there forever."

I open a drawer in the cupboard.

"You know what makes me sick?"

I tightly grasp the handle of a kitchen knife inside the drawer.

"That it was a stain like that that broke me!"

I take out the kitchen knife.

I have used this kitchen knife several times already for the same purpose. This particular kitchen knife happens to be the sharpest.

She turns pale when she sees that I'm holding the kitchen knife. She asks me, "What are you going to do with that?" although I bet she has some idea of what's about to happen. But she cannot believe that I would ever do what she is 'predicting'.

"You want to know what I am going to do with this? Ufufu..."

But you know what? I'm really sorry to say this, but it's probably—

"I will reject you!"

—exactly what you expected.

*I *****ed ***** with a *****.*

I try to avoid comprehending the dark and painful feeling that's about to arise. Even though resistance is futile, even though it's required for my goals, I try to resist...because I don't want to feel this way; because I want to keep acting like I didn't understand this feeling.

She has collapsed and is spitting up blood.

She must be suffering. How pitiful.

*I probably failed. I should have ****ed her as painlessly as possible.*

"You know, failing at this can turn out to be really scary. Boys develop an absurd power when they're desperate. Even a slender boy is much stronger than I am. Being struck with such strength is very painful. But the looks in their eyes when they hit me are far scarier. They look at me as if I'm trash. Why did I fail again? ...ah, right. Because I used a cheap knife just because it

looked cool. It's pretty hard to kill people with such a thing, you know? And it's unpleasant at that. Stabbing or cutting people is... It's gross! I could vomit because of it. I've also cried, asking myself why I have to do such unpleasant things. But you know? In the end, the same thing will happen over and over as long as the person in question takes the same actions. And because of that, my desired future will never arrive. So I have no choice but to erase that person, right? It can't be helped, can it? Isn't that just cruel? Why do I have to do such things?"

She's looking at me with powerless eyes.

"But to tell you the truth, maybe I wouldn't even need to stab you like that. In the end, 'rejecting' is just a matter of mindset. But you know? I couldn't find any other way. I couldn't 'reject' anyone except by killing him or her with my own hands. It's not that easy to 'reject' someone from the bottom of my heart. I placed a burden on my heart. And by creating these feelings of guilt, I forced myself to flee from that person. Thanks to that, I can truly feel that I don't want to meet the person anymore—I've 'rejected' them. Nobody will be able to remember that person anymore, no matter what happens."

Her head droops. She seems unable to hold it up any longer.

"I know! It's my fault, right? It's all my fault, right? But tell me, what should I do then? ...Sorry. You have no idea, do you? Aah, why am I even talking so much? I know why. I'm so anxious, so anxious, so anxious, I can't be quiet. I'm secretly hoping that you might forgive me after I explain myself. But there's no way you'd forgive me, is there? I'm sorry. Really, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being so selfish. But you know? I'm the one who suffers the most, after all. I'm properly accepting the blame. I know that I'm doing something bad. So, to be honest, I couldn't care less about what you think of me."

I wonder who I'm talking to?

But I have a hunch that it doesn't matter. I've never talked to anyone in particular, anyway. I've never even considered the person who's collapsed on the floor a 'friend'.

I'm alone anyway.

"N-No—"

And yet, I don't want to admit it.

Even though it makes me all the more aware of just how alone I am in such a place, I can't help but scream:

Please come!

Come quickly!

"Kazu-kun!"

I wonder when... when I started to address him so casually? Although I've repeatedly gotten his permission to address him that way during these time loops, he never remembers.

Just now, the door opens.

He's here.

The one I've been longing for, Kazuki Hoshino, is here.

Kazu-kun loses his ability to speak upon seeing this terrible spectacle. Next to him is that annoying girl, Aya Otonashi, who's living in my box like a parasite.

"...so you've finally come, Kazu-kun."

I'm amazed at my own words.

Just how stupid am I?

Just how many times did Kazu-kun betray my expectations? Didn't I give up on him several times after the uncountable number of betrayals?

It's not even a coincidence that he appeared here. I decided to invite him here, in order to show him this scene.

And yet I can't help but expect a miracle from him because he showed up, just like that time long ago. I'm starting to expect that he will return me to the real world.

Although—there's no way that would happen.

Kazu-kun's eyes are wide open.

"Kazuki. I can guess how you feel. But you should have known."

The redundant girl says something.

"That the owner is—Kasumi Mogi."

*Kazu-kun turns his widened eyes to the collapsed *****.*

What was her name again? Oh well. I forgot. I even forgot when I forgot.

"...w-why—"

You want to know why I did it?

I can't hide my irritation at Kazuki's slowness.

Reproaching him with my eyes, I scream my thoughts out loud at him.

"Die!"

It's not enough.

"Die, die"

It's still not enough.

[illegible]

I just don't want to—

"—die!!"[1]

27,755th time

Once Maria mentioned it, I also realized that Mogi-san wasn't wearing any makeup. As a guy, I'm obviously clueless when it comes to makeup—so it was a lot easier for Maria to pick up on that change.

But Mogi-san still owns a makeup pouch.

Why is that?

This is Maria's line of reasoning:

—She got tired of using it.

I can't rely on my faded memories, but I suppose Mogi-san originally cared a lot about her appearance. However, she stopped bothering to apply makeup since there was no reason to do so anymore in the Rejecting Classroom. She'd left the pouch untouched in her bag since March 1st—before the Rejecting Classroom began.

Mogi-san grew tired of taking her makeup out of her bag and applying it.

That would only happen to someone who remembers over 20,000 loops.

And that person can only be—the owner.

Thus, the girl I love, the girl who loves me, Kasumi Mogi, must be—the owner.

"There's something I have to tell you, Kazu-kun."

That's what Kokone said when she called me during the previous iteration, the 27,754th loop. She told me:

"Kasumi loves you!"

Kokone knew of Mogi-san's love for me. I'm sure that Mogi-san talked with her about it since they were good friends until yesterday.

Maria and I wanted to trap Mogi-san.

But if we were the ones doing it, she would naturally be wary. If possible, we wanted to avoid giving Mogi-san any chance to prepare herself, as she has already defeated Maria so many times.

Instead, we decided to use Kokone as a proxy. We concluded that she could lure Mogi-san into our trap, if she made Mogi-san believe that I planned to confess to her.

Our plan ended up—killing Kokone.

I recall Mogi-san's words.

"...so, will you go out with me?"

How many times did she confess to me? How long has she been in love with me? If our love was mutual, then why—

"Please wait until tomorrow."

Why did she say that?

Mogi-san seems to be unaware of the blood that covers her clothes and body. She is expressionless.

—like always.

Has she always been so expressionless? No, from within my fragmented memories, I can pull up an image of Mogi-san smiling brightly. But the smiling Mogi-san doesn't seem real to me at all. My mental image of Mogi-san is that of an expressionless and reticent girl.

But what if that seemingly fake, brightly smiling Mogi-san, is actually the original?

What happened to the girl called Kasumi Mogi?

"She got overwhelmed," Maria grumbles, as if answering my silent question. "She got completely absorbed by this endless recurrence," she declares, eyes scornfully focused on Mogi-san.

This idea has already occurred to me: The human psyche can't possibly endure such a vast number of recurrences.

But Mogi-san has experienced the same day 27,755 times.

And after experiencing it so many times, Mogi-san is now stained in blood.

"...It's your fault, Kazu-kun, " she says, gazing at me. "This happened because you cornered me!"

"...Mogi-san, what have I done?"

"'Mogi-san'." Mogi-san repeats her name and twists her lips. "I told you. I definitely told you. I told you hundreds of times, didn't I?"

"W-What are you talking about...?"

"I told you to call me 'Kasumi', didn't I...?!"

...I didn't know. I didn't remember this at all...

"I said that hundreds of times and you agreed to do it hundreds of times, didn't you? So, why? Why do you always forget about it right afterwards?"

"It can't be...helped..."

"Can't be helped?! Tell me, why can't it be helped?!" Mogi-san shouts hysterically. All the while, her face remains almost expressionless.

Most likely, she has forgotten how to change her expression over the course of these thousands of recurrences because she no longer has any reason to do so. She can't properly laugh, cry or get angry anymore.

"Kazuki, don't listen to her."

Mogi-san releases me from her gaze and scowls at Maria.

"Don't address Kazu-kun with such familiarity!"

"I can call him whatever I like."

"You can't! ...Why does Kazu-kun remember you, but not me...?"

"Mogi, *you* designed things to work this way, because it makes it easier to do the same thing over and over again."

"Shut up! I didn't mean to do that!"

Come to think of it, during the 27,754th loop, Mogi-san looked frightened when she saw that I remembered Maria.

At the time, I was sure that Mogi-san was just terrified by my strange behavior. But now that I know she's the owner, my point of view has changed: actually, she let her built-up discontent burst out because I remembered Maria but didn't remember her.

"Kazu-kun..."

I'm not used to being addressed like this by her, either.

Perhaps she once asked me for permission to call me 'Kazu-kun', just like she asked me to call her 'Kasumi'.

I may have forgotten about it, but Mogi-san remembers everything that happened within these loops.

"Kazu-kun, you said that you love me."

"...Yeah. I probably did."

"I agreed gladly! I told you that I love you, too!"

"....."

I only remember that she said 'Please wait until tomorrow'. That's it. I don't remember anything else.

"You don't remember, huh?"

I can't give her an answer.

"Can you imagine how happy I was? I tried my best during all these loops in order to make you pay attention to me. I styled my hair, I tried applying mascara, I tried to appeal to you, I researched your hobbies, I learned what you liked to talk about... and you know what happened? A miracle occurred! Your attitude clearly changed. I realized that you'd gotten interested in me. You started to accept my confession, even though you'd been turning me down before. You even confessed to me. Every time you did that, you got my hopes up. Each time, I thought a joyful 'continuation' was awaiting me. I thought that this recurrence might finally end. But you know what? ...Kazu-kun—"

Mogi-san looks at me expressionlessly.

"—every time, you forgot."

I can't bear her gaze and look downwards.

"Even when you forgot, I had high hopes that you would remember the next time. Each time you accepted my confession, each time you confessed to me, you raised my expectations over and over. But in the end, you didn't remember anything. I soon gave up hope. But you know, if someone confesses to you, you can't help but hope anyway! A miracle could happen, after all. And that's why each time it happened, I was injured anew."

I can't imagine going out with her. But Mogi-san made real something that I wasn't even able to imagine. She made me fall in love with her. Perhaps this is why some of my memories are vaguely preserved.

But in the end, winning me over like that was meaningless.

There's nothing to look forward to.

After she wins me over, it ends right there.

What awaited her was a perfect one-way love.

An absolutely one-sided love that stays unrequited even after she gains my affection.

"So I didn't want you to confess to me anymore. But you came anyway. You still said that you loved me. And although I was so happy, the pain was even greater... so I had no other choice but to tell you this every time:"

Mogi-san says those words that I have definitely heard so many times before.

"Please wait until tomorrow'."

My heart is aching.

All this time, she was the one most injured by those words—far more than I was.

But why doesn't she just end the Rejecting Classroom, then? Otherwise, her one-sided love will remain unrequited. Even if she has other reasons to preserve her box, she's definitely suffering greatly.

"Kazu-kun... do you get it? It's your fault that I'm suffering. It's all, all, *all* your fault."

"What's with that nonsense you're blurting out?" Maria interrupts her with an ill-humored look on her face. "What an extreme lack of responsibility. You're just forcing the responsibility for your pain upon Kazuki because you can't endure the agony of your own Rejecting Classroom anymore."

"...No! It's Kazu-kun's fault that I'm suffering!"

"Think whatever you want, but Kazuki isn't responsible. He can't even remember you. Kazuki has only been protecting his memories for the sake of his own goal, not for your rotten heart."

"Why... why would you know that!?"

"Why, you ask?" Maria stands up straight and sneers at her. "The answer is simple," she says nonchalantly. "Because it is I who has observed Kazuki Hoshino more than anyone else in this world."

"Wha—"

Upon hearing these caustic words, Mogi-san loses her train of thought.

She tries to utter an objection, but her mouth just flutters open and closed without forming any words.

I shut my mouth for a different reason. I mean, it's embarrassing when someone says something like that! Seriously.

"N-No, I've watched him for the same amount—"

"Your time is worthless." Maria dismisses her claim with a glib response.

"Don't you understand how worthless your time is, just by looking at what you've achieved? Look at yourself in the mirror. Look at your hands. Look at your feet."

Mogi-san's face is covered with congealed blood that's turning black.

Mogi-san's hands are gripping a kitchen knife.

Mogi-san's feet are resting right beside Kokone's corpse.

"Please feel free to object. Insist that you watched Kazuki for as long as I did—if you really believe that your words have any weight."

Mogi-san seems stricken with regret, and turns her gaze downwards.

I'm unable to say anything to her.

".....heh, fufufu. You have watched Kazu-kun more than anyone in this world? I guess so. Perhaps it's just as you say. Ufufufu, but it doesn't matter! Why should it?"

She chuckles as she faces the ground.

"Hmpf, I pity you. So you broke at last."

"At last...? Ufufu... what are you saying?"

Without ever looking up, she points the kitchen knife at Maria.

"Did you think I was still in my right mind to begin with?"

She raises her head.

"Let me teach you a nice lesson, Otonashi-san! Everyone I kill disappears from this world!"

As always, her face remains expressionless.

"So it doesn't matter! It doesn't matter how long you have watched Kazu-kun if you're going to disappear anyway!!"

Mogi-san charges at Maria with the kitchen knife. I reflexively shout out Maria's name. But Maria just gazes at Mogi-san with boredom, seemingly completely unconcerned. She simply grabs Mogi-san's arm and pins her just like that.

"Ugh..."

Their difference in power is clear, so much so that I'm embarrassed to have called out her name.

"Sorry, but I have mastered all the major martial arts. Seeing through your straightforward movements is as easy as twisting the arm of a baby."

The kitchen knife falls out of Mogi-san's hand and clatters to the floor.

Disarmed, Mogi-san stares in shock at the kitchen knife.

"...as easy as twisting the arm of a baby...?" Mogi-san whispers painfully, her gaze still directed at the knife. ".....ufufufu"

And yet, even though she should be in pain, Mogi-san smiles.

"What's so funny?"

"*What's so funny*, you ask? Ufu... haha, HAHAAHAHAHAHA!"

She laughs with her mouth wide open. However, there is no smile on her blood-stained face. Despite her laughter, the corners of her mouth aren't lifted. Her eyes are wide open rather than softly narrowed.

Maria wrinkles her forehead upon hearing this loud laughter.

"Of course it's funny!! After all, you compared grabbing my arm to twisting a baby's arm! You, of all people! You, Aya Otonashi, said that! Marvelous! Absolutely MARVELOUS!"

"I fail to see what you find so amusing."

"Really? Then tell me, could you actually twist a baby's arm?"

I still can't understand why she was laughing, but Maria seems to be bereft of speech.

"Oh well, you captured me. Good for you. Congratulations. So? What was your goal again?"

"....."

"I know. I've heard it numerous times, after all. It's to end this repeating world, right? It's to obtain a box, right? So what are you going to do? You just have to kill me in order to end it, right?"

"...right."

"I know that you have mastered all those martial arts, Aya Otonashi! You told me yourself! Why are you... why are you acting like you outwitted me? Isn't that ludicrous? Did you think I didn't realize that? How embarrassing! It's embarrassing, isn't it? Listen... I've returned to the past just as often as you, you know? I know you very well! You disarmed me. You're holding my arm. So what—?"

Mogi-san becomes serious again and starts speaking in a hushed voice.

"What are you going to do to me next?"

"....."

Maria does not reply.

"Oh you gentle, gentle Otonashi-san. You, who can't kill me. You, who can't torture me. You, who can't even break a single bone in my body. Are you able to twist the arm of an oh-so weak baby while remaining so elegant as to reject violence? No. You can't. Of course you can't."

I see. So this is the main reason Maria keeps losing.

As soon as violence is the only solution, Maria can't do anything. And Mogi-san is aware of that.

"Think about it for once. Didn't you realize I've had the opportunity to kill and 'reject' you this entire time? Do you know why I refrained, even though you were clearly a nuisance? For one thing, you're so kind as to rescue me from that accident! But that's not all. I noticed it the first time you discovered that I was the owner and lost against me."

Maria clenches her teeth.

"You're not even worthy of—being my opponent."

A long time ago, Daiya told me that the *protagonist* is inferior to the *transfer student* because of the latter's informational superiority.

But his thesis was wrong.

The Kasumi Mogi protagonist has more information than the Aya Otonashi transfer student.

"I've had enough of this pattern," Mogi-san says in an exaggeratedly bored tone. "...But unlike the previous times, Kazuki's here now."

"Well yeah. So, should we try out something new?"

Mogi-san kicks the handle of the kitchen knife. The knife spins across the bloody floor and slides to a stop at my feet.

"Pick it up, Kazu-kun."

Pick what up? The kitchen knife?

I look down at the kitchen knife again.

There's even more blood on it now. It's giving off a deep, ruby red glow.

"Hey, Kazu-kun? Do you love me? If so—"

I raise my face and watch her lips.

"—Give me that knife and let me kill you."

—- What?

I don't understand. I know what her words mean, but I can't understand what she just said to me.

"Didn't you hear me? I told you to give me that knife so I can kill you."

She repeats herself. I guess I heard her correctly.

"Mogi, have you gone mad?! Don't you love Kazuki?! Why would you want such a thing?!"

"You're right. I love him! But that's exactly why I want him to die. Didn't I say that it's Kazu-kun's fault that I'm suffering? Therefore, I want him to get out of my sight. Isn't that the logical conclusion?" Mogi-san says as if her

line of thought were completely natural. "To begin with, why do you think I took your bait, even though I knew that Kazu-kun would come? Well, I've got a proper goal! I've made a decision—the decision to kill him," she spits out as she takes a peek at me. "I can 'reject' Kazu-kun by killing him. He will get out of my sight. If that happens, I'm sure I won't suffer anymore. I will be able to stay here forever."

"Mogi, what's with that nonsense—ugh! Ah—"

Maria groans suddenly and falls to her knees. She's holding her left side.

"...? Maria?"

Something is sticking out of her left side.

...eh? Stabbed?

"Ah—Ma-Maria!"

Maria looks at the object protruding from her left side. Clenching her teeth, she pulls out this foreign body without hesitation. She moans again in pain. Scowling at Mogi-san, she throws away the object that she has just removed.

I look at the item that's rolling on the floor. It's a folding knife.

"You let down your guard. You may have mastered all kinds of martial arts, but that doesn't make you immune to surprise attacks. This cheap knife isn't effective against boys at all, but it should be more than enough for your slender body, right? I'm sorry, but your constitution stays the same in this world no matter how much you train!"

Maria tries to stand up and fails—apparently her wound is rather serious. Blood is steadily leaking out from her left flank.

"I've been through a lot as well, you know. So I thought it might be better to keep that on me. That knife is always hidden on my person."

Mogi-san walks over to me. She crouches down and picks up the dropped kitchen knife.

"Ah—"

Although she is completely defenseless while bending over, I'm unable to do anything beyond emitting a small sound. I can't move; I feel petrified. I can't do anything but stand there like a nail in a wall.

My body's been left behind. My mind is frozen because it cannot accept the reality taking place before my eyes.

"Didn't I say so, Aya Otonashi? People who are going to disappear anyway don't matter."

Mogi-san sits on top of Maria and raises the kitchen knife.

She swings it down with no hesitation. Over and over. Over and over. Until Maria's breathing has definitely ceased.

During the entire process, Maria did not let out a single disgraceful moan.

"If you had stayed a mere eyesore like a bunch of flies that swarm around feces, I would have spared you. But no, you had to make a move on my Kazu-kun!" Mogi-san complains and stands up.

Maria isn't moving anymore.

Mogi-san looks at the kitchen knife that she has repeatedly stabbed Maria with. Then, she throws it at my feet.

I reflexively look at the knife that's been soaked in the blood of Kokone and Maria.

"Well then, you're next, Kazu-kun."

I crouch down and reluctantly reach for the kitchen knife. I immediately jerk my hand away when I feel the slimy touch of blood. I gulp and reach down once again. My hand quivers. I can't grasp the knife properly. I close my eyes and force myself to grab it. I open my eyes again. Because I'm holding the weapon that killed Kokone and Maria, my hand quivers even more. I almost let go of it. I grab it with both hands to suppress the quivering.

Aah, I can't.

I definitely can't do anything with this knife.

"What are you doing, Kazu-kun? Come on... give me the knife!"

No, it's not just me. No one could do anything with this knife.

That means—

"...Who made you do all this, Mogi-san?"

Mogi-san also shouldn't have been able to commit those atrocities. She can't possibly have been able to do this alone.

Unless she's been manipulated by someone.

She stares at me in confusion.

"...What are you talking about? Are you trying to suggest that someone made me do this? Is there something wrong with your head, Kazu-kun? That's impossible!"

"But I fell in love with you."

".....what are you getting at?"

"Even after experiencing more than 20,000 recurrences, even after getting cornered, you would never do such a thing, Mogi-san. The girl I fell in love with would never do such a thing!"

For a moment Mogi-san seems deeply affected by my words, but then she scowls at me and replies. "...I see. So you want to make me spare you by appealing to my emotions, huh? I'm disappointed. I never thought you were such a coward. So you really don't want to die for my sake, huh?"

There's no way I would want to. I don't want to die, and I don't believe that my death would bring about her salvation.

".....Kazu-kun, do you think murder is an absolute taboo?"

"...Yeah."

"Ufufu, how upright. Yeah, you're right. You're perfectly right!" she says and peeks into my eyes. "—Well, enjoy your stay here for your entire life... no, for all eternity," she says coldly—probably because she knows that this is the exact opposite of what I'm wishing for. "After all—handing over my box would kill me."

In other words, she will die if the Rejecting Classroom comes to an end? Maria never mentioned that.

"Do you understand? If you escape from this box you'll kill me. Do you think I'm lying? Do you think I'm just making up random excuses in order to protect the box? I'm not! You'll understand if you think about it! I mean, why do you think my wish is to return to the past?"

Why does someone want to reverse the flow of time? Maybe because a tragedy occurred...?

"Didn't you wonder why I'm always run over by that truck? Admittedly, there were times when Aya Otonashi sacrificed herself for me... ah, by the way, there were also times when you sacrificed yourself. But most of the times I was the one who died, right?"

"Ah—"

Don't tell me—

I've finally come up with a plausible explanation.

Why doesn't Mogi-san end the Rejecting Classroom?

That traffic accident is an inevitable phenomenon within the Rejecting Classroom. Someone, usually Mogi-san, falls victim to that accident. I don't know why, but it always happens.

'I think—once something has happened, it can't be undone.'

I once said those words. Maria's answer was that 'Your sentiment is normal. And apparently, the creator of this Rejecting Classroom also had the same thoughts.'

So, say I had the opportunity to destroy the box. Would doing so also mean—

"Are you prepared to make me the victim of an accident?"

—killing the girl I love?

I hear a dull clang. I fail to recognize it at first, but then I realize that the knife has fallen to the ground.

"You're not even able to hand the knife to me? How miserable..."

Mogi-san walks up to me. She picks up the kitchen knife.

She will probably kill me now.

Because she has committed so many sins, only by continuing to do so can she justify her acts. If she doesn't, she will be crushed by the pangs of her conscience. She can't return anymore. She has lost control, so she will go berserk and kill me.

Most likely—'Kasumi Mogi' stopped being 'Kasumi Mogi' after she killed her first victim.

Her expressionless face is splattered with the blood of two girls.

She crouches down to my level because I can't stand up.

She wraps her arms around me while holding the knife. She crosses her arms behind my neck and touches the blade to my neck, right above my carotid artery.

Mogi-san's face draws nearer to mine and she opens her mouth.

"Please, keep your eyes closed."

I do as instructed.

Something soft touches my lips.

I instantly realize what it is.

At last, a certain emotion wells up from deep inside me. It's the emotion that didn't well up even when I saw Kokone's corpse or when Maria was being stabbed.

It's anger.

I—can't forgive this.

"It's not the first time I kissed you, you know? But I'm sorry that it's always so awkward."

I can't forgive this. I mean, I can't even remember what she's talking about. And I'm sure I won't remember this instance, either.

"Bye, Kazu-kun. I loved you!"

Is Mogi-san really satisfied with memories that she can't share with anyone? Well, she might be, considering how accustomed she's become to solitude.

A sharp pain runs through the side of my neck.

I betray Mogi-san's request and open my eyes.

Mogi-san is upset, but she can't avert her eyes in time. Aah, our eyes have finally met properly.

I grab her hand.

From the corner of my eye, I can see how the red liquid flows from my neck onto her hands and then drips down.

"...What are you doing?"

"I... can't forgive..."

"You can't forgive me? Fufu... I don't really care. I'm aware of that. But it doesn't matter! It's farewell already anyway."

"That's not it."

"...What is it, then?"

"It's not you—I can't forgive the Rejecting Classroom that's so removed from everyday life!"

I tighten my grip on her wrist. Her delicate hand is pinned down by mine. My sight turns black for a moment. My neck wound might be fatal.

"Let go of me—!"

"I won't!"

I still don't know what to do. I'm sure I can't kill her. But I clearly realize one thing: this Rejecting Classroom is unforgivable. Therefore, I absolutely must not disappear.

"Let me kill you! Please, let me kill you!" she shouts. Even though these are supposed to be words of rejection, it sounds to me like she's crying in pain, almost like a lament.

...ah, I see. I finally noticed.

She is crying.

On the surface, she's expressionless as always. She hasn't shed any tears. I look straight at her. She averts her eyes immediately. Her thin and fragile legs have been trembling the entire time. She can't pick up on her own feelings, having lost her facial expressions long ago. She can't even realize that she's crying. Her tears don't flow anymore, probably because they dried up long ago.

I'm sorry that I didn't notice this before.

"I won't let you kill me. I won't let you reject me."

"Don't mess around with me! Don't torment me any more!"

I'm sorry, but I can't listen to her entreaty.

Thus—

"I absolutely refuse to abandon you to solitude!" I shout.

Maybe it's just my imagination, but I've had the feeling that Mogi-san relaxed for a second.

And yet...!

"Ah—"

My vision turns completely black. A blow to my cheek temporarily restores my sight. The scenery has changed. Mogi-san's blood-stained slippers are right before my eyes. My hands aren't gripping her wrist anymore; they're lying powerlessly on the ground.

It's not that she did anything else to me. I just collapsed on my own.

Even though I was sure that I had finally found a way to persuade her, I can't move anymore. I even have problems moving my mouth.

"I'm an idiot."

I hear her voice.

Unable to raise my head, I don't know what her face looks like as she speaks.

As if instructing herself, she repeats the same phrase over and over.

"Now it really is farewell, Kazu-kun."

"—I must kill..."

"—I must kill myself."

—into her own body.

27,755th time

"—I must kill myself."

...and so I desperately instruct myself. This is the only way. The only way to prevent myself from being possessed again by my fake 'self'.

I will abandon everything.

This is the only way I can think of to atone for my sins.

I thrust the kitchen knife into the middle of my torso.

I fall on top of Kazu-kun. His face is right in front of mine. He has finally realized what I have done and is looking at me with eyes wide open.

Please don't make such a face. I try to calm him down with a smile—but then I notice that I can't smile anymore. I have not smiled or cried in ages, after all.

My body temperature is dropping rapidly.

I hope the filth inside me will disappear along with my body heat...

—I absolutely refuse to abandon you to solitude!

Thank you. But that is not possible. It has been impossible from the very beginning.

How could anyone disagree? I mean—

—I already died a long time ago.

0th time

Aah, I'm going to die.

Even as I continued living for an unbelievable length of time after being blown away by the truck, these thoughts repeated over and over. I can't possibly survive such an impact. I'm going to die. My life ends here.

N-No, I don't want to—

These are the silly thoughts of someone who has never seriously considered the concept of death, even though she's thought about dying numerous times.

To die. To end. There's nothing ahead. I've finally realized its dreadfulness, now that I'm about to die.

If this was going to happen anyway, then couldn't it at least have happened before love changed my world?!

Now that I understand love!

I have a goal!

I haven't done anything for the one I love yet!

—this is just too cruel.

"Mhm, this is a situation that draws my interest."

A man (woman?) appears out of the blue. I have no clue as to where he came from. To begin with, how can he even speak to me normally? I can't even clearly perceive where he is standing. My body is so twisted that I don't even know where I'm looking. Still, that person looks straight at me. This is an impossible situation. Ah, no, that's not right. I've somehow been transported to an unfamiliar place and I'm now standing in front of that person. While this place leaves no impression on me at all, I realize that it's very special.

"Don't get me wrong, I am not talking about your accident. Such incidents are perfectly ordinary and happen all over the world. What draws my interest is that this accident happened near the boy that I am interested in."

What is he talking about?

I've heard that you see your life flash before your eyes when you die, but I haven't heard anything about being brought to such a weird place and talking to such a strange person.

Is this person the grim reaper or something?

He's a person who doesn't look like anyone in particular, while somehow resembling everyone at the same time.

One thing is for sure: he is deeply charming. His appearance, his voice, his fragrance—they all fascinate me.

"I want to see how this boy reacts to 'boxes' used in his vicinity. Ah, but I am also interested in how you use your box, of course. After all, I am interested in all of mankind. That being said, you're naturally but an 'extra'."

The person smiles as he says these incomprehensible things.

"Do you have a wish?"

A wish?

Of course I have one.

"This is a box that grants any wish."

I accept it.

I immediately realize that this box truly has the power to grant any wish. Therefore, I'm absolutely certain that I must hang onto this box.

If I can't change the end of my life, then please, let me just redo a bit of it. I'm fine even if I just get to change what I did yesterday. There is something I have left to do. Even if it's just yesterday, I can still convey my feelings. If I'm able to do just this, I'm sure that I won't have any regrets. No matter what his answer is, I won't have any regrets. Please, turn back time a tiny little bit. I'm aware that this is impossible. But still, it's what I wish for.

After I make that wish, the box opens like the mouth of a carnivorous beast and vanishes, merging with the space around me.

Alright. Things should be fine like this.

"Fufu—"

The charmingly smiling person comments on my wish with a single sentence.

"—that is what you get when you restrain yourself."

Then he disappears.

And I get thrown out of this special place that somehow left no impression whatsoever on me.

I'm now inside a chamber enveloped in darkness. An intense stench assaults my nose, as if countless corpses have been abandoned here. It's a disgusting room, so much so that a dank prison would seem like paradise in comparison.

Aah, if I stay here for just an hour I'll collapse. But the room starts to get painted in white. The whiteness makes me lose sight of the boundaries of the room. Then, as if someone lit a stick of sweet incense, a sweet fragrance erases the rotten smell. Each time I blink, things like a blackboard, desks and chairs appear. The room is finally filled up, and the only thing left to do is to summon the necessary actors. Insert the people who were in our classroom yesterday. If that's possible, I can redo things. I can redo yesterday.

But no matter how cleanly painted over this place may be, it is still at heart that disgusting chamber and far worse than any prison.

This is the world after my death, full of white—oh so white—and sweet hope. So, yeah. If it looks like I can't achieve my goal—

—I will have to destroy this box myself. Before the pretty decorations here come unstuck, exposing the shameful and disgusting sight of that chamber to me once more.

5,000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun jokingly offers this off-the-wall idea after I consult with him.

6,000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun jokingly offers me the same solution for the n -th time after I consult with him.

7,000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun jokingly offers this reasonable solution.

8,000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun jokingly offers this logical conclusion.

9,000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun jokingly offers this self-evident truth.

9,999th time

Haruaki's own words have already taught me how to erase him.

"How you can make sure that you definitely don't meet a certain person anymore?"

Haruaki has offered me various solutions - so many solutions that I'm sick of hearing about them. Eventually, we arrived at the conclusion that feelings of guilt are the best way to make oneself avoid a certain person. It's the same conclusion yet again.

And, just like always, he also tells me how to create those feelings towards someone.

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun jokingly suggests the last method that's left to me.

"That's the ultimate solution. Well, if you do kill him, it's not even a matter of meeting or not anymore, heh!"

Why is it necessary to 'reject' Haruaki-kun? Well, it's because I think his disappearance will have a big impact on me and Kazu-kun.

Living in this world is like playing a Tetris game that never ends. At first you try your best to reach a new high score. And that's fun. But midway through, you stop caring about your score. After all, it doesn't matter whether you reach a new high score or not; it's just a game that's going to be reset and then you have to start all over again. Nothing changes even when you reach Game Over. You still try your best to have some fun, but if you play half-heartedly, the screen fills up in no time. It gets boring. It gets uninteresting. It gets tough on you. It gets painful. You lose the will to even rotate the blocks. You just don't care. But even though you don't care, the blocks keep coming. No matter how often they reach the top, you can't stop the game. If I stop, I'll die. And I don't want that. After all, I still have a goal. I have to spend today with no regrets. That's why I must somehow change this system as a whole.

And Haruaki's an important part of this system.

Therefore, I have to 'reject' him.

".....can you tell me once more how I can create feelings of guilt?"

"...what's wrong Kasumi? Well, not that I mind..." Haruaki says, just like always.

"Why not just kill him?"

It's exactly the 1,000th time he's given me this reply.

*Right! That's the only way. Yeah, it can't be helped. You understand, right?
You already told me this 1,000 times, so you understand, don't you? Rather,
you want me to do it, right?*

—you want me to kill you, right?

10,000th time

"Please stop! Please don't kill me!"

I will ignore his pleas.

I will kill Haruaki Usui.

After all, this was his own suggestion, right?

*I ****ed Haruaki Usui.*

And then I vanished. The person who was once Kasumi Mogi vanished. I guess I won't ever see the 'me' again who was crushed in agony, ground to dust and blown away somewhere. Nevertheless, my body will repeatedly be resurrected. My body will never stop coming back to life, even though it's empty inside.

I feel something entering my empty body.

It's something filthy that was born in this box. Something unbelievably grotesque that smells as nasty as a bunch of dead bugs stuck together with feces. I reject it. I continuously reject it. But I know very well: I can reject it as much as I want, yet this thing will gradually enter my body through its gaps. It sniffs out my weak spots like a hyena and starts to dye me pitch black by eating into my weaknesses. I become pitch black and even lose awareness of my own identity. I become a fake who is still wearing my own face.

But still, I can't let it end yet.

I will definitely spend today without regrets!

—spend today without regrets?

"Hahaha."

Am I stupid? How would I be able to do that here? This is the world after my death. So how would my regrets in the real world disappear if I do something in this parallel world? Even if Kazuki confessed to me in this world, it would be meaningless. I mean, how would I ever become satisfied by a completely separated "today?" ...Nothing comes to mind.

The outcome I longed for.

In order to pursue it, I've tried my best during the utter standstill of all these iterations.

But I didn't even know what this outcome that I've been longing for was.

I've groped for it all this time without even knowing what it was.

And then, I came to the conclusion in the end that there is no such outcome.

"I don't want to die!"

Aah—Heh. I finally figured it out.

So that was my wish.

So that's why my wish can't be eternally fulfilled.

And because I couldn't figure that out earlier, I distorted the box horribly. This distorted wish of mine changed into 'shackles' that won't disappear anymore.

They're already inside the box, so they'll never disappear.

These 'shackles' will remain inside me and continue to animate the fake me.

So I'm sure that even when I disappear, this box won't. Not ever.

27,755th time

"I absolutely refuse to abandon you to solitude!"

Just hearing those words could transform me to the Kasumi Mogi I once was for a brief moment.

"I am an idiot."

Didn't I decide already? Didn't I decide at the very beginning that I'd destroy the box before I lost sight of my goal and disgraced myself?

But those countless recurrences gradually weakened my determination until it finally disappeared entirely.

Once I killed a certain person whose name I don't even remember anymore, I should have lost my ability to return.

But—

"Just because of this, just because of such a phrase, I—"

—it was still possible.

My love has saved me at the last possible moment.

But I know that I'm going to get captured again right away.

I'm going to get captured by the box.

Therefore, while I'm still 'Kasumi Mogi'—I must kill myself.

"Goodbye, Kazu-kun."

And now, the box that couldn't bring me happiness despite everything it offered, is coming to an end.

I will pass away so close to my beloved one. Maybe this is a rather happy turn of events. It all turned out for the best in the end. I am fine.

I close my eyes.

I will certainly not open them any—

"Who permitted you to die?"

I'm startled into opening my eyes.

The unidentifiable person who originally gave me my box is standing nearby. Kazu-kun doesn't seem to have noticed him, so I guess I'm the only one who can see him.

When our eyes meet, that person smiles calmly.

"I still want to observe that boy. It will bother me if you end this outstanding opportunity for unlimited observation of your own accord."

What? ...What is he saying?

"But well, I suppose it's not so thrilling if I keep observing similar situations over and over again. Let's see... it's against my principles, but may I take care of the box? I'll tamper with it just a little bit. You were planning to destroy it anyway, so you won't mind, will you?"

Without waiting for my answer, he places his hand on my chest. The moment he does so...

"Ugh, aaaah! AAaaAAahhh!!"

I experience an intense pain exceeding all my imaginings. This pain makes me scream out, even though I've become accustomed to being struck by a truck, and I didn't even raise my voice when I stabbed myself. This kind of pain is different. I feel as if my soul is being cut into a thousand pieces. It's a pain that directly attacks the nerves and can't be eased.

He takes out the hand-sized box and smiles.

"Aah, I think you've already figured this out, but this box can't function without you anymore. So, you'll have to get into the box."

As he says this, he starts to fold me up.

He folds me and folds me, and then he stuffs me into the box.

Kazu-kun. Please, Kazu-kun.

I know I'm being selfish. I also know it's a ridiculous request after everything I've done to you. But, but—I can't—I can't hold it in anymore—

Kazu-kun, help me—

27,756th time

I have to end the Rejecting Classroom and regain my everyday life.

What's the greatest barrier I might face?

Some kind of giant obstacle? For instance, being forced to use a narrow thread to cross from one building to another? Having to repeat the same day a million times?

I don't think that's the case. I mean, I could still figure out how to beat those obstacles. As difficult as it might be, I could still acquire the necessary skills during the nearly infinite amount of time that I have access to.

No, I believe the worst thing I might face would be not knowing *what* the obstacle is.

If I don't know what I need to do, I'm pretty much powerless. But since time is frozen here, its passage won't solve the problem for me.

And right now—I'm facing the worst case scenario.

"What's wrong, Hoshii? There's something strange about you today."

During the break after the first lesson, Haruaki speaks to me while laughing lightly.

The lesson has just ended, so no one's left the classroom yet. Mogi-san is still sitting in her seat. Right—all 38 of my classmates are present.

I tried to figure out why the 'rejected' people have returned, but for some reason, I have forgotten almost everything from the last loop. I feel like we discovered something, but I can't remember anything.

But that's fine. That's still fine.

If we managed to discover something important, we'll rediscover it in no time flat. The return of all my classmates remains a mystery, but that doesn't affect my mission.

That's not the problem.

"But today sure is boring～. Nothing's happening at all!"

Nothing special happened.

Kokone's remark causes a dull pain to run through my chest.

I don't want to believe that. I don't want to acknowledge the current situation.

"Daiya."

I address Daiya, who's behind me, in a pleading voice. He turns his head toward me, waiting to hear my query.

"Did you hear anything about a transfer student today?" I say, faintly hoping that he'll nod in response. But my question is—

"Hah? What are you talking about?"

—denied with a frown, as expected.

Right—Aya Otonashi doesn't 'transfer' anymore.

Thus, I'm at a loss as to what to do now.

Find the *owner*. And then, what? Remove his *box*? Destroy the box? How do I do that?

I intended to find a solution together with Maria. But that was just my being lazy. I was completely dependent on her, so I don't know what to do now that she's not here.



"But listen, isn't there no difference between living our everyday life or being captured by that Rejecting Classroom?" Haruaki says in response to my question.

I consulted with him because I didn't know what else to do. So I took him to the rear of the school building during lunch break; that's the answer he gave me after I finished telling him the whole story.

I know Haruaki well. He's not answering that way because he can't believe my absurd story.

"The same...?"

"Ah, no. It's not that I don't believe you, I swear. Just, well, let's say we really are inside that Rejecting Classroom. How's that any different from the everyday life you long for?"

"What's different? They're completely—"

"Equal, aren't they? The guys who seemed to have disappeared, me included, have returned. Aya Otonashi wasn't a member of this class anyway. Everything got reset to its original state. Or am I wrong?"

Everything just returned to its original state?

...Maybe.

After all, I might have never met Maria but for the Rejecting Classroom.

No one knows who she is. That's perfectly natural. Aya Otonashi's existence was never properly part of class 1-6 to begin with.

Maybe it was all just a dream? Maybe I just imagined her entire existence?

...I don't know. But it's still 'March 2nd' today.

"But you know, if we're still inside the Rejecting Classroom, then today's 'March 2nd' will never end. So how can you equate it with our everyday life?"

I was sure Haruaki would agree with me. But...

"Actually, I had already considered that."

Contrary to my expectations, he tilts his head and continues.

I am left agape by his straightforward response. Haruaki awkwardly scratches his head when he sees the look on my face.

"I know what you want to say. But look, aren't you only uncomfortable when you're aware that you're caught in a time loop? What if, for example, your everyday life up until now had been full of such long, repeated days? You wouldn't have noticed, right? In fact, I don't feel anything different right now, either. I'm convinced that I'm living my usual everyday life at this very moment. Even if, for argument's sake, I'm actually trapped by the Rejecting Classroom."

He's—right.

I only feel discomfort and disgust *because* I'm aware of this recurrence. If I didn't know about it, I wouldn't feel troubled at all.

I wouldn't feel this conflict right now if I didn't know about the Rejecting Classroom. Even if the day were repeating, I could fully enjoy the version of everyday life presented to me. I could spend my time without knowledge of a certain person's tragic fate. My life would be convenient and full of happiness.

To destroy this is no more than mere selfishness.

"I'm sure you understand now, Hoshii. You know what you should do, right?"

"Yeah. I know what I have to do."

"Right? Well then—"

Haruaki stops suddenly. I turn around in surprise, and see Mogi-san standing beside me.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"I'd like to borrow Kazuki. Okay?"

Haruaki and I exchange glances.

"Umm, Hoshii. Are you set for now? If there's anything else you want to tell me, I'll be there for you."

"Yeah—thanks, Haruaki."

Haruaki leaves, saying "You're welcome."

I wonder what she wants from me. Did she go out of her way to find me?

I focus on her face. What a pretty face. After I make that observation, I can't stand to look at her anymore and avert my eyes.

"_____"

Even though she is the one who came to me, Mogi-san frowns.

"...I'm going to ask a strange question, but please answer without hesitation."

"Ah, okay..."

I nod, but Mogi-san just keeps frowning. She's having trouble getting started. After a while, she apparently comes to a decision and looks me straight in the eye.

"Am I Kasumi Mogi?"

—Hah?

Because that question is so completely unexpected, I can't even act surprised. Instead, I just stand there, looking serious.

Mogi-san averts her eyes uncomfortably.

".....Um, Mogi-san? Did you lose your memory or something?"

"...I can understand your confusion. But please answer my question."

"Of course you're Kasumi Mogi, Mogi-san..."

Oh wow, I'd never say something like that in the course of my everyday life.

For some reason, she murmurs "I see..." Mogi-san looks a little desolate.

"Well then. This may sound unbelievable, but prepare yourself and listen. I am—"

Then, Kasumi Mogi, the girl I love, says something completely bizarre.

"—Aya Otonashi."

"——Huh? Aya Otonashi...? Mogi-san is Maria? What's the meaning of this?"

I'm overcome with surprise, but Mogi-san continues.

"Yeah, I am Aya Otonashi. I was about to lose confidence in myself because, as absurd as it sounds, literally everyone is addressing me as *Kasumi Mogi*. They're doing so despite my differing appearance and manner of speech—but I am definitely *Aya Otonashi*."

Well, the person standing in front of me is Kasumi Mogi. I admit that I also get the feeling that her appearance and manner of speech are a perfect match for that of the Aya Otonashi I remember, but...

"Err... right, there's that split personality thing that comes up all the time in mangas, right? Are you perhaps dealing with such a problem right now...?"

That's quite absurd as well, but it's still within the realm of reason.

"I considered that too. But if that were the case, you should be confused by my new behavior, and I shouldn't know the name 'Aya Otonashi.' Right?"

Right, I never said the name 'Aya Otonashi' in her presence.

"Wait, why did you suddenly turn into Mogi-san?"

"...don't phrase it so ambiguously. I merely got swapped into the position of 'Kasumi Mogi'. It's not like I transformed into her. Well... anyhow, how could I explain this situation... Right, you gathered that there can't be a 'Kasumi Mogi' in this 27,756th iteration if I'm 'Aya Otonashi,' right?"

I nod.

"'Kasumi Mogi' disappeared. Her position became empty. Do you still remember what I told you: I didn't become a transfer student of my own accord? Perhaps I was placed into the empty position this time instead of being made a transfer student."

That's just too...contrived.

"There's no way I, no, the entire class would mistake you for Mogi-san!"

"Indeed, I also found that problematic. But while dealing with that issue, I simultaneously came up with a solution to another problem. The owner of the Rejecting Classroom experienced all 27,755 loops. Thus, her personality should have changed, too. Yet, no one noticed."

That might be correct.

"It's safe to assume that there's a rule within the Rejecting Classroom that prevents others from noticing the changes in the owner. Furthermore, the

change in the owner isn't affected by her relationships. Kasumi Mogi was the owner but disappeared for some reason. And I replaced her. The rule kicks in, so no one notices anything, although both my appearance and personality, those of 'Aya Otonashi,' are completely different."

Mogi-san's explanation sounds plausible for now.

If she really is Maria, that would be a reason to rejoice. It should be. I mean, on my own, I'm clueless. But Maria will surely be able to guide me.

However—

"I don't believe this."

—I can't accept it.

Mogi-san seems surprised by my forceful resistance and widens her eyes.

"...I know it sounds unbelievable, but that's no reason to oppose me."

I bite my lip.

"Ah, I see. You just don't want to accept the facts. Accepting them would also mean admitting that Mogi's the owner. And you don't want to admit that, which is fair enough. After all you love M—"

"Stop it!!" I shout reflexively.

You're exactly right! I absolutely do not want to accept that. But I'm not referring to the assertion that she's the owner. What I can't accept is—

".....I love Mogi-san," I choke out.

"I know."

Mogi-san raises an eyebrow, as if to indicate that I don't have to tell her right now.

"Therefore—you can't possibly be Maria...!!"

I clench my fists. Seeing them tremble, she should understand what I'm trying to say. She opens her eyes wide and closes her mouth.

I love Mogi-san.

That feeling has not changed, even now.

That feeling has not changed—even though Mogi-san is now acting just like 'Aya Otonashi.'

If everything Mogi-san says is true, then I'm a hopeless fool. Not noticing that my beloved person changed. Not noticing that my beloved person was replaced by Maria. I have no problem with her, it's just that I can't deal with my own feelings.

Love is blind, they say. But this takes that expression to a totally new level.
Fake.

The love that I have felt for such an unbelievably long time would turn out to be fake.

Therefore, I cannot accept it. I can't accept that she's 'Aya Otonashi.' The moment I accept it, this love is going to end.

"I love Mogi-san!" I spit out as if I were declaring war on her.

She looks down without saying a word.

I just made the worst love confession ever. I didn't even think about the other party while confessing. I only did it to deny reality.

I clench my fists even more tightly. But still, I have to say it.

"If you insist that you're Maria, then prove it to me!"

She continues to stare at the ground for a few moments.

But before long she opens her eyes and speaks with determination.

"Kazuki. Even if you give in to the Rejecting Classroom, my mission won't change. So at first, I considered leaving you alone. However, I decided against doing that. I don't want you to fall down on your knees because of something like this."

She grasps my right hand. My gaze wanders to her face. She is staring straight into my eyes.

"I want to make sure you realize that I'm definitely 'Aya Otonashi.'"

She brings my hand toward her chest.

"W-What—?"

"I am a box," she says scornfully. "Therefore, I am not the human 'Kasumi Mogi'."

"But you're merely having your *wish* granted, right? The same goes for Mogi-san! Showing me your box won't prove that you're 'Aya Otonashi!'"

She shakes her head.

"In fairy tales there are fairies who only grant a single wish, right? When you hear of such a story, have you ever thought: 'Why not just wish for unlimited wishes'?"

I nod. By doing so, one would have an infinite number of wishes. I've already thought about that as well.

"It's a bit embarrassing, but my wish was something similar," she says in a self-derisive tone. "My wish was—to grant the wishes of others. I became a being that grants wishes."

"That's—"

Just like the box.

But that seems like a very fine and upstanding wish, so why does she smile with such contempt for herself?

"But I couldn't fully believe in its feasibility. The box couldn't completely grant my wish. Every single person that used me as a box disappeared, because the box had incorporated my doubt that 'there's no way wishes would be granted so conveniently in the real world'."

I'm left speechless. Is there any limit to how much the boxes need to toy with our lives before they're satisfied?

"Kazuki, I'll let you touch my box. After that you won't be able to ask a stupid question like 'who are you' anymore."

She unfolds my hand and pushes it against her chest.

I feel her heartbeat.

At that moment—

"Ah—"

I sink to the bottom of the sea. Although I'm at the bottom of the sea, it's bright, almost as if the sun is there with me. It's beautiful. I'm fascinated by the water. But it's cold. I can't breathe.

Everyone seems happy. Everyone seems happy. Everyone seems happy. At the bottom of the sea. People frolic around with the fishes of the deep, suffocate, swell up, freeze, get crushed by water pressure, smile. There is no meaning. There are no interactions. People are playing their own puppet shows, their own picture shows, their own comedies. A tragedy where everyone is happy.

There's someone who's crying.

Only a single person is crying, surrounded by people happily *HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA* laughing.

I shake my head. This is my imagination. Just my imagination. I can't see anything here!

But I already realize one thing. I've grasped someone's feelings, and they're unlikely to let me go anymore.

Utter loneliness.

I crawl out from the bottom of the sea and return to where I was before.

She has released my hand.

I slowly remove my hand from her chest and drop to my knees, exhausted.

At the same time, I also notice that my cheeks are wet with tears.

I can't deny it anymore. After being shown *that*, I can't deny it anymore.

"This is my box—the Flawed Bliss."

She is—'Aya Otonashi.'

Mogi-san holds a box, too? That doesn't matter. It's not an argument that can be used to deny Maria. There's no need for logic. I realized just from touching her. I realized that she's Maria.

I'm sure she never wanted anyone to see this. Nonetheless, she showed it to me.

So that I won't lose to the Rejecting Classroom.

"Maria, I'm sorry..."

Maria shakes her head with a smile.

"__"

I can't stand my own feelings.

I've realized—I've realized that she's 'Aya Otonashi' and not 'Kasumi Mogi.' Yet my feelings toward her haven't changed. Her smile looks terribly cute to me. The remains of my love still confuse me instead of disappearing.

I feel so mortified by the strength of my attachment to that love that my tears just won't stop flowing.

"Kazuki."

Maria calls my name.

"Eh?"

And then she does something unbelievable.

She embraces me.

I know what she's doing, but I can't understand why.

Her embrace is timid, not what I expected from Maria at all.

"You were the only one who remembered my name."

Maria speaks in riddles.

"If it weren't for you, I would have been alone. I don't like to admit it, but you supported me, even while I thought you were the owner. So—"

I finally recognize what she is doing.

"—let *me* support you this time."

She closely embraces me. In contrast to her words, her embrace is weak, more like she's enveloping me rather than supporting me.

"I'm happy to treat you gently, at least while you still feel like you love me."

I don't know.

I don't know if this emotion is directed toward 'Kasumi Mogi,' 'Aya Otonashi,' or both.

The only thing I know is that I'm unbelievably happy.

"Ah."

Perhaps—

Perhaps Maria wasn't just letting me touch her box for my sake. After all, Maria didn't want me to call her 'Kasumi Mogi'. That means she wanted me to recognize her existence.

After considering that thesis for a brief moment, I have to admit I'm overthinking things and laugh unintentionally.



"Hoshii, what did you talk about with Kasumi after I left?"

School is over. Haruaki pokes my chest with a big grin on his face.

"I know: She confessed to you, didn't she?"

"Ah...no..."

Well, she confessed to me that she's 'Aya Otonashi,' so in a way, he's correct.

"Oh? You're trying to evade my question! I smell a rat! Don't tell me I hit the bull's eye?! Damn, I'm jealous! Kasumi has gotten really pretty, hasn't she!"

Ah, I see.

Listening to Haruaki's cheerful babbling, I finally realize what I have to do.

Although reuniting with Maria was very reassuring, I had been at a loss as to what to do next because 'Kasumi Mogi,' the owner, disappeared.

"If you make Kazuki Hoshino your enemy, you will also pick a fight with an immortal!"

I recall the words Haruaki once said to Maria. This happened a long time ago, so I'm not too sure of his exact words anymore.

Right. I must gain his support, no matter what.

"Haruaki. Can we resume the talk we were having before?"

He is taken aback for an instant when I ask him out of the blue, but then he smiles and nods.

"I told you earlier that I realized what I have to do, right? Let me tell you my conclusion."

I look into Haruaki's eyes and declare war.

"I will—fight against the Rejecting Classroom."

He widens his eyes when he hears my sharp declaration.

"Umm, listen... Didn't I explain it to you clearly? Even if we are in that Rejecting Classroom, it shouldn't matter as long as you don't know about it."

"Yeah, but I just can't accept that! I can't possibly accept an everyday life where I can't make any progress because everything's repeating!"

"Why?"

"Because—I do know about it, right here, right now."

Maybe my life would move along smoothly if I just forgot about being inside the Rejecting Classroom.

However, I am aware of it. I know that this world is nothing more than a fake everyday life.

Therefore, I can't ignore it.

Maybe it's just self-indulgence. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that I'm right and I can't act any differently.

"...Well, it's up to you, but is there a reason that you decided to become so obstinate?" Haruaki asks curiously.

A reason...? The reason I insist so strongly on a genuine everyday life? ...Indeed, my attachment to my everyday life might not be normal.

"You look as if your life depended on it," Haruaki whispers.

Ah, right. That's it. The reason is so obvious.

"It is—the meaning of life."

Haruaki opens his eyes wide in surprise.

"The meaning of life? What's that? What do you mean?"

"I can't spell it out exactly, but... for example, getting 100 points on a test you didn't study for at all won't make you happy, right? But when you get 100 points after studying really hard while trying to get a good grade, you'll be happy, right?"

"You've got a point there: I value stuff a lot more when I work hard for it, even though the actual value doesn't change!"

"In my opinion, *pursuing* something is what it means to live. I don't think that's an exaggeration. I mean, everyone will die someday. The consequence of life is death! Caring only for the end result scares me."

"Everyone will die someday...Indeed."

"If this is the Rejecting Classroom where everything is rendered void, then I can't accept that. I have to engage in my genuine everyday life in order to protect the meaning of life. Therefore, I deny the box that denies true everyday life."

Haruaki listens to my confession with great interest.

...Maybe I didn't even need to tell him all that. Haruaki would probably help me anyway.

"Haruaki, will you help me?"

Without missing a beat, Haruaki gives me a thumbs up.



Per Haruaki's suggestion, we decided to also bring in Kokone and Daiya. The five of us have gathered around the bed in the high-class hotel that I previously visited with Maria.

I explained the whole story to Kokone and Daiya.

Actually, I expected that Maria would complain about it being a waste of time, but she stayed mostly silent and even added a few comments from time to time. Maybe she wanted to hear some new opinions on the matter.

"Umm...So you're telling us that Kasumi's actually Aya Otonashi-san and not Kasumi, while the real Kasumi is the owner who created the Rejecting Classroom and we don't know her whereabouts... And now you want a

solution, huh...? ...No idea what your talking abooout! You've lost meee!" Kokone plops down on the bed. "Oh, this bed is awesome."

"I didn't ask for your impressions about the bed, though."

"I know!" she yells in response to my joking remark. Kokone's probably seriously mulling over the problem, despite her behavior.

"Let me ask a question," Daiya interjects. "If we're inside the Rejecting Classroom, that supposedly inevitable accident will occur again, right?"

"It should, yeah." Maria answers.

Huh...? Daiya is taking this seriously?

"What's with that stupid look, Kazu? Flapping your mouth open and closed—are you a carp in front of a baited hook? "

"Ah, no—I was just surprised that you believed so readily in what we said about the Rejecting Classroom."

"Ha! As if," Daiya spits out.

"—Uh, huh...?"

"I wouldn't care if it were just you who had a screw loose, but even Mogi's saying some weird stuff right now. There must be some other explanation for what's going on, but it's too tiresome to theorize about that. So I decided to stop being skeptical and accept the Rejecting Classroom for now out of convenience."

In short, he'll help us?

"And then, Daiyan? The accident might occur again. And then?" Haruaki urges him to continue.

"Yeah. Who is going be the victim if the accident occurs as usual? Mogi isn't around anymore, is she?"

"That's going to be me, I guess...It seems natural that I take over that role as well, since her position was forced upon me."

"Was the victim always Kasumi?" Haruaki asks.

"No, other people would sometimes get run over while trying to rescue her. So there was Kazuki, Mogi, me, and even you because you tried to save me while I was trying to save Mogi. In fact, you did so several hundred times."

"Whoa! No kidding? Wait, isn't several hundred times kinda impossible? ...Ah, no, not necessarily, huh. It's quite plausible that the same person would take the same action in the same situation."

"Even worse, in most cases you confessed to me beforehand," Maria sighs.

"A man that sacrifices himself to save the woman he loves... Hell yeah! Ain't I cool?!"

"To be frank, you should have minded your own business."

"H-How cruel."

"Well, try imagining how I felt. You have no idea how excruciating it is to watch someone sacrifice himself for you because he loves you... What you did was highlight the haughtiness of my pursuit of the box. It was the most painful way to break my will, hands down."

"Mmmm..." Haruaki grimaces.

But I guess he has no regrets, since his actions themselves weren't wrong.

"While we're at it, how many times did I confess to you, Aya-chan?"

"Exactly 3,000 times."

"W-Wow, I'm passionate..."

"So you got turned down 3,000 times! That's got to be a new getting-dumped record! You're so bad you're almost adorable, Haru!"

"Just shut up, Kiri!"

Those two never fail to amuse me.

"Mogi...Ah, no, I'll call you Otonashi for now. Otonashi, why did Mogi head to the scene of the accident every time despite her knowledge of what would occur there?"

Maria raises an eyebrow in response to Daiya's question and answers.

"Because it's part of the rules of the Rejecting Classroom. Oomine, there's probably no need to tell you this, but I've tried to prevent the accident numerous times."

"Well, of course you wouldn't sacrifice yourself right away. It's more natural to think that you arrived at that course of action after some time. I, for one, would never choose to be run over."

"Hey, why are you talking about the accident? Nothing will be solved unless we find Kasumi, right?"

Kokone tilts her head as she interrupts them. Daiya looks away with displeasure.

"This humanoid noise generator is really getting on my nerves."

"Ahaha. If only you were run over by a truck 20,000 times, no? ☆"

"Just asking, Kiri, but how are you going to find Mogi for us?"

"Well... beats me. Besides, do you have a better idea?!"

"No clue."

"Oho... I'm amazed that you're able to play the innocent while calling me a noise generator. Why don't you scrap your last name 'Oomine' and call yourself 'Mr. Innocent,' instead? Daiya Innocent. Whoa, it fits perfectly!"

"I'm not the only one with no idea. No one else knows, either. Right?"

Haruaki and I exchange glances. Well, Daiya's right. If we knew, we'd propose something right away.

"Thus, we have to search for another solution. Consequently, I addressed the truck accident, which is obviously a special event within this recurrence. It's a completely normal thought. Ms. Humanoid bullshit generator, did my explanation get through to you?"

"Ugh..."

Kokone grits her teeth in vexation, defeated by his explanation.

"Anyway, we might make some progress by preventing the accident, so it's worth trying. That's your point, right, Daiyan?"

Daiya nods in response to Haruaki's summary.

"Exactly. But there's no point if we can't prevent it."

"No—" Maria denies his statement. "It may be worth trying. My actions were limited when I was alone, but with this many people the outcome may be different."

"Does the number of people actually matter? Zero stays zero, no matter what you multiply it by. Doesn't the same hold true for the kind of impossibility we're facing?" Daiya objects.

"I get your point, but I believe there is still a possibility. The conditions have changed, after all: I am not Mogi, but 'Aya Otonashi,' so the probability might not be zero anymore. There's no reason not to improve the odds by increasing the number of people involved, don't you think?"

Daiya crosses his arms and ponders for a while. At last he nods, saying "You have a point."

"Alright! It's decided, we'll try it! We'll prevent the accident somehow! Any objections?"

No one objects to Haruaki's interjection.

Yeah. That should probably work out.



It's early in the morning, an hour before the usual time of the accident.

We are standing with umbrellas at the scene of the accident, the crossroads.

Haruaki and I are supposed to save Maria if necessary. It'll be dangerous if the accident still occurs, but both of us chose our roles of our own free will.

Maria was supposed to find and break into the truck in question. She figured that the chance of getting run over by the truck would be minimized if she just sat in its driver's seat.

I'm nervous. We mustn't fail. I didn't sleep a wink yesterday. Out of anxiety, and the desire to confirm something, I talked with Maria over the phone for several hours.

I look at Haruaki's face.

Unlike me, he doesn't seem nervous. His expression is completely normal. It's the face I have always seen in the Rejecting Classroom.

This time we may be able to destroy the 'Classroom'.

—Whether the accident happens or not.

"Haruaki, I'd like to talk a bit while we wait, OK?"

"Why so formal? Of course that's OK!"

I instinctively look up at the sky when I hear the sound of raindrops hitting my umbrella.

"It's about Mogi-san."

"Kasumi? Umm, not Otonashi-san but the original one?"

I nod.

"I didn't tell you that she...killed us, right?"

"...Now doesn't that sound violent, eh?" Haruaki raises an eyebrow.

It's not like I was trying to keep him from finding out. I simply couldn't remember what happened until I realized that Mogi-san's the owner.

And as if my shackles were broken the moment I recalled the identity of the owner, I regained all of last iteration's memories.

"She killed me, Maria, Kokone and probably even you."

"...We were killed? By Kasumi? Why so? For what purpose?"

"She did so in order to 'reject' others! Originally, everything is rendered null and void within the Rejecting Classroom. So even if you kill someone, it's going to get undone. But it seems Mogi-san is able to 'reject' others by killing them with her own hands. I think she does so because she can then wish to never meet that person again from the bottom of her heart."

Haruaki nods with a serious expression. I have already explained 'rejection' to him, and that once it happens, no one can recall the 'rejected' person anymore.

"Our Kasumi has, huh... quite unbelievable. But... well, it's no surprise that even Kasumi got like this after experiencing almost 30,000 iterations, I guess. Fair enough."

"Do you really think so?" I ask.

"Mh? I mean, it may be hard to imagine, but anyone would go a little crazy in such a situation, right?"

"Indeed. But you know what? Even if you went insane, you still wouldn't commit murder. It's not normal to think that way!"

"You think so? Aren't you too fixated on your own point of view?"

Maybe. But I can't believe it. I mean, murder could only become an effective way to 'reject' *because* it made her feel guilty. I can't believe that such a person could think of such an inhuman crime on her own.

"...you confessed to Maria 3,000 times and were run over several hundred times in her place, right?"

"I guess so. In my current state, I can't remember, of course."

"Yeah. But at the end of the day: your actions tormented her, right?"

"Ah—... not on purpose, though," Haruaki says with a bitter smile.

"She felt so tormented because any message, no matter how absurd, gains weight after being repeated so many times. For example: no matter how confident you are in your beauty, if someone tells you that you're ugly a thousand times, you'll lose that self-confidence—even if the comment was made in jest."

"Well, I guess so."

"Thus, Maria couldn't help but become aware of you when you confessed to her 3,000 times. And we're talking about Maria. Believe me, she wasn't unaffected when you opposed her."

'If you make Kazuki Hoshino your enemy, you will also pick a fight with an immortal!'

I recall those words once more.

"...Oh? Did I set the flag for Aya-chan's route?"

I smile lightly and ignore his joke.

"So, what if someone suggested murder as a solution to Mogi-san a thousand times? Wouldn't that make Mogi-san believe that there's no other alternative? After all, she couldn't even rely on anyone else and was on the verge of going insane."

Haruaki nods.

"...I admit that would be tough. And it's actually possible. After all, the person who talks to her would be at a standstill. His actions and values wouldn't change. It would only be natural to say the same things over and over. If he said something once, he'd probably say the same thing several thousand times."

"You're right. But I'm not worried about that scenario. That'd be like an accident, where no one's at fault. But—"

I finally look away from the threatening sky.

"—what if someone chose his words and actions purposely in order to corner her?"

And then I—focus on Haruaki.

Haruaki doesn't show any signs of discomfort even though I'm staring at him.

"Mh? But that's impossible, isn't it?"

The expression on Haruaki's face looks totally normal.

"You're wrong! For example, Maria and I could have, if we'd wanted to. If someone kept pretending to have lost his memories when dealing with Mogi-san, it's possible!"

Haruaki silently listens to my words without any objection.

"I originally thought that being able to retain your memories would be an advantage. After all, the more information, the better, right? But that's not always true. Retaining your memory also means that you'll be continuously attacked by those who lose their memories, and those who pretend to have lost their memories. The people who lose their memories exist in a safe zone. They can attack those of us who stand at the front lines from their safe position."

I experienced such an attack when the girl I love replied with 'Please wait until tomorrow' to my confession. Though to be fair, she wasn't standing in the safe zone.

"What if someone deliberately attacked Mogi-san from that safe place? Someone who was aware of her pain, who made sure she wouldn't escape and prepared a 'murder' option for her. If so—"

"If so, that guy controlled Kasumi and deliberately contributed to the murders," Haruaki says casually.

He doesn't deny my claim.

"We can't be sure that Mogi-san was the only target."

"...but?"

"I mean, she wasn't the only person standing at the front lines. Maria and I were there, too. Depending on that person's goals, he may also have tried to manipulate me and Maria. No... we may already be more or less under his control."

"—*wanna try killing me?*"

I remember someone saying that to me at one point.

Actually, I heard those words more than once. That person repeated his statement without end. Those words stuck in my head like a curse.

In addition, corpse after corpse was put on display for me.

Maria was confessed to, had to watch her confessee sacrifice himself for her sake, and was even antagonized by that same person.

That's all the relevant info I managed to pull from my fragmented memory. There might have been some smaller traps that I didn't pick up on.

Continuously attacking from a safe place with no downside. Even if his plans didn't go as expected, he could repeat this attack without limit.

"If we assume that our actions were controlled by that person to a certain degree—"

I gulp.

"—he also planned for us to be in our current situation."

Haruaki remains silent. His face is hidden by his umbrella, so I can't see his expression.

The silence continues. The sound of the rain seems strangely loud. I hear a soft sound. At first, I don't know what it is, but when I perk up my ears, I realize that it's suppressed laughter.

Haruaki moves his umbrella aside so I can see his face.

He stares at me and laughs in amusement.

"Okay, um, Hoshii. What's the point of this joke, or rather, grand hypothesis? First, it's definitely impossible. It's not that easy to control others, is it? Sure, it's a funny story, but to be honest, I don't know whether it's okay to laugh or not because you look so serious...No, forget that; I mean, I already started laughing."

"Oh, was I being a bit too indirect?"

"...Indirect? Anyhow, I don't even get what that guy's goal is. But whatever it is, there should be a less roundabout approach."

Haruaki is still speaking in a bright voice.

"Yeah. I don't know his motive either. So I thought I'd just ask you."

"Ask me...?"

Once I say this, I'll be irrevocably committed.

"Haruaki—"

But I've lost my willingness to retreat long ago.

"—Why did you corner us like this?"

He doesn't answer.

He's once again hiding his face with his umbrella.

He doesn't say anything. He probably doesn't intend to tell me anything.

"I don't remember exactly how it happened, but we became friends right after school started. And thanks to you, I also become friends with Kokone and Daiya. My school life would probably have been a bit more boring if it weren't for you. All that good stuff happened thanks to you."

If so, I'll have to do the talking for him.

"We haven't even been friends for a full year, but—"

"So, you can't judge whether I'd do something like this?"

I shake my head, though Haruaki probably can't see me.

"There are lots of things I don't know about you. But there is one thing I know for sure. I can say this much with confidence."

I declare.

"Haruaki Usui would never corner us like this."

I can finally see his expression.

Haruaki looks at me with widened eyes.

"So—"

I finally get to the point.

"So—who are you?"

"Oh? You're trying to evade my question! I smell a rat! Don't tell me I hit the bull's eye?! Damn, I'm jealous! Kasumi has gotten really pretty, hasn't she!"

Haruaki was just messing with me back then.

But something stood out.

There is a rule that the Rejecting Classroom enforces. Other people never notice any of Mogi-san's changes—not even when she was replaced by 'Aya Otonashi'. So how? Just how?

—how could he say that Kasumi has become pretty?

That's not the only reason for suspicion.

Haruaki had been 'rejected'.

Even I had forgotten about him. But I somehow managed to remember him again.

'I remembered him because he's a dear friend.' That's how I justified it. But why would I remember him when I couldn't remember a single other person who had been 'rejected'?

It's just a hypothesis, but I think I didn't completely forget him because someone else had been mixed in with Haruaki.

Both arguments together don't count as proof positive of anything. I realize they're pretty flawed.

But that doesn't matter anymore.

Because I have remembered.

Because I have remembered something that I shouldn't be able to remember.

"Do you have a wish?"

"This is a box that grants any wish."

The words of someone who could assume anyone's identity, but at the same time, resembles no one at all.

"Tell me what you're trying to do!"

And then I say his name.

I say the name of the being who parceled out this box, the being I had forgotten about until now.

His name is—

"—O"

And the moment I say his name—

"Fufu..."

—Haruaki vanishes from his own face.

It's not like his face changed shape. Haruaki just isn't present within the smile on his face anymore; it's a fake who has disguised himself using Haruaki's skin.

At last, the menace that has been pursuing us takes shape.

—O.

"Oh boy, nobody should actually know my name except the current owner of this box, you know? That's bizarre."

"You were careless with your words."

"Careless?"

O giggles. He truly seems amused.

"I wasn't careless at all; there was no need for me to be careful to begin with. *You* are abnormal because you became aware of me via those hints!"

"You think so?"

"Then tell me, when you see someone acting a bit unusual, do you suspect right away that someone else has replaced him?"

I have to admit that he's right. No matter how suspiciously someone acts, it's unreasonable to think that someone might have taken over that person's identity.

"And yet, you discovered me. That means that you knew of me, a possible cause of such an occurrence, even though nobody should be able to remember my existence."

"If that's true, how did I remember you?"

"Who knows? It's really mysterious, but maybe Aya Otonashi's existence influenced you? Even so, you still shouldn't be able to notice me just because someone taught you something."

O is speaking pleasantly and openly. But right now, I couldn't care less about what he's talking about.

"...Aah, you want to understand my intentions? Okay! There's nothing to hide. I—just wanted to observe you up close."

As I hear him say this, I start to feel it.

Aah—again.

The same strange, uncomfortable sensation I felt when I met him for the first time. I feel it once again.

What is it? What is this feeling again?

"...I don't get it! Why does this make you want to corner Mogi-san?"

"Why did I corner the owner? As I said, I wanted to observe you. Well, let me be a little more clear," O starts to say with amusement. "I wanted to see how you'd react to someone else's box. When Kasumi Mogi's flawed wish of altering her past was granted, I thoughtlessly rejoiced at first. I was happy because I was able to observe your involvement with a box over a long stretch of time...But it didn't take long for me to realize that this was non-ideal. I'd prefer to observe you in as many different situations as possible, but I can't do that within this box that you people call the Rejecting Classroom. Everyone acts the same way every time, yourself included. No matter how much Kasumi Mogi and Aya Otonashi stabilize their own memories, it's not interesting at all if the important person—that'd be you—doesn't retain his memories."

I hug myself in response to the discomfort I'm feeling.

"Therefore, I decided to interfere with you guys. I took over Haruaki Usui because his central position allowed me to easily influence all three of you. Well, I built a nice little nook for myself by using Haruaki Usui, Aya Otonashi and Kasumi Mogi, and made sure that you retained your memory. Thanks to that I was able to observe you quite nicely!"

"So, could it be that you manipulated Mogi-san into killing me because you wanted to...?"

"Yes, I wanted to see how you'd react to a deadly attack from the girl you love."

...For *that* reason alone, Mogi-san was forced to suffer constantly.

"Ah, that's also why I induced you to love her, of course."

"Wha—"

My feelings were induced—?

"Oh? I was sure you had noticed. Ah, I see. So you didn't *want* to notice. Heh...It's these moments that make it worth being so close to you. To tell the truth, I don't need to be in this box to observe you. But then I would probably overlook moments like this. Watching from outside the box is really bothersome; it's almost like peering through the lens of a super-efficient telescope from far up in space. You can see whatever you want, but it's hard to keep it in focus, so to speak. So, it was really fortuitous that I could watch you from up close as Haruaki Usui!"

I finally understand this uncomfortable feeling.

Right. It is—dread.

It's not like I haven't felt any dread until now, but this dread is so different from its normal form that I couldn't recognize it at first.

"Well then, Kazuki Hoshino-kun. What are you going to do?"

I can't form any words.

Because I became aware of this terrible dread, I can't even open my mouth.

"Did you think that everything would be resolved once you demonstrated that 'I' am inside Haruaki Usui? I seem totally human right now, and since I'm also a murderer, you could just hand me over to the police and call it a day. But that's not it, right? Your goal is to regain your everyday life, isn't it? Talking to me resolves nothing!"

He is dangerous. More dangerous than anything else I've come across.

"That's also why I didn't go out of the way to conceal my transformation into Haruaki Usui. Indeed, the box is in my possession now because I stole it from the owner. I could show it to you right now, but there's no need to do so. I don't have to hand it over to you just because you remembered me. You don't have the power to force me to, either."

He is interested in me. But only as a test subject. No more, no less. And naturally I have no idea how to deal with someone who treats me like this.

Therefore—

"—Well, you're undeniably correct."

—the person speaking to him like that clearly wasn't me.

"Kazuki alone doesn't have that power."

O looks at me, trying to figure out where that voice is coming from.

It's coming from my bag.

The klaxon of a truck resounds loudly. With its engine roaring, a huge truck races toward us. O looks in its direction and frowns slightly. The truck that is rushing toward us seems awfully familiar to me.

And sitting in its driver's seat...is Maria.

"I missed you, O!"

This voice echoes from my bag. It's coming from the cell phone I turned on for our entire conversation.

The truck barrels toward us but we stand our ground. I hear the sound of an emergency brake kicking in, but the rain is keeping the brakes from working properly. The truck's coming closer and closer, but O doesn't move an inch. When I see him standing his ground, I do the same, but I instinctively close my eyes.

The sound of the emergency brake fades away.

I open my eyes. The truck has literally stopped before my very eyes.

"What was *that* supposed to achieve?" O smiles faintly as he poses this question to the figure in the driver's seat.

"It's just a little welcome. How fortunate that you weren't run over as a substitute for Kasumi, huh?"

I hear this voice in stereo, from in front of me and from my bag. After stepping out of the truck, Maria finally removes her Bluetooth headset and terminates our call.

O is staring at Maria. She stands in front of us without an umbrella.

"So you listened to our entire conversation? In other words, this laughable strategy was just a distraction to begin with? What a shame—I would have loved to see Kazuki-kun getting discouraged by its failure."

"I was taking this strategy seriously at the time you proposed it. But as it turns out, Kazuki knew about your true form and left me in the dark."

I didn't really mean to, though. I just didn't know when to tell her that I'd made that discovery.

However, I did make sure that I could have a private chat with Haruaki by securing his cooperation.

"But that was the right choice in the end. If I had been by Kazuki's side, you might have continued to play dumb."

"Did you steal the truck just to appear as if you were far away? Well, I appreciate your efforts, but why would I play dumb if you were present? You might be a box, but that doesn't mean you are capable of doing anything to oppose me."

"Oh, so you didn't notice? Looks like my efforts were totally wasted! Well then, let me ask: You're aware of my Flawed Bliss, right?"

"Yes, I know of it. And I also know that it won't help you against me."

Maria laughs at O.

"Ha, you really won't ever comprehend humans. Maybe you'll get it if I phrase it like this: 'I have prepared to erase you'."

O reacts to her words with a wry smile.

"All you can do is cram others into your own box, no? So how would you be able to do that?"

"It seems you still don't know why I was fixated on Kazuki."

She suddenly calls out my name. O looks at me. Although his eyes are kind, they frighten me. They're the eyes of someone looking at a piece of pork and thinking about how to cook it.

".....I see."

O smiles.

"So you finally get it. Kazuki's got a gift for using boxes. He might even be able to master my Flawed Bliss. And he would certainly wish for his everyday life to continue. For his everyday life to be free of beings that menace it. Like the boxes. Like you."

Maria scowls at O as she declares this.

O isn't overwhelmed by her words. He's not surprised or amazed. He just sorrowfully casts down his eyes.

"I see. So you haven't changed at all," O says.

To the girl who has become more than human after living through 27,755 loops.

"But an inferior box like you would disappear as well, wouldn't you?"

Maria doesn't even flinch.

"I'm aware of that."

"I figured."

O, however, still looks sorrowful. He doesn't even seem to worry about the possibility of his own erasure.

"Can you still not live for your own sake? Can you only act for the sake of others? I pity you from the bottom of my heart for living so miserably!"

"To hell with your pity."

"At first I was interested in that unusual trait of yours, but it is worthless. A human that does not have any personal desires is the same as a robot. I could just as well observe a vacuum cleaner. You are the most boring existence possible!"

Maria grits her teeth with vexation after hearing his speech. Fair enough. Instead of being perceived as an opponent, the enemy is taking pity on her.

"Okay. I don't want to get erased, so let's make a deal. I will hand over the box to you. In return, I want you to let me go. What do you think?"

"...Hmph, aren't those conditions too much in your favor when you're about to get erased?"

"You should be thankful that I even bothered to respond to your lame threat. There's no guarantee that Kazuki-kun would really use your box. I don't even want to bother to estimate how low the probability is that I would disappear, *if* he used your box. I am making this unnecessary conciliatory gesture solely to express my respect to Kazuki-kun for finding me, you know?"

"Conciliation? What you'll hand over to us is an old birdcage in which you caged Kazuki. You can prepare as many new birdcages as you want, can't you? You were already getting tired of this one, and would have swapped it out for a new one soon enough, right?"

"I'll leave that up to your imagination."

"Hmph...Kazuki, are you okay with this deal?"

Maria asks for my approval. I nod. I'm fine as long as we can do something about the Rejecting Classroom.

"Kazuki Hoshino-kun. May I give you one word of advice?" O asks me. "You are someone who doesn't wish for change. But most of the owners wish for exactly that when they obtain a box. They may want to gain something, they may want to become something, they may want to get rid of something—they all try to make such desires come true. As a result, you will automatically find yourself coming into conflict with them."

I frown since I fail to grasp the intent behind his words.

"Kazuki Hoshino-kun. Do you consider yourself abnormal?" He asks me.

"...I'm normal."

He smiles in response to my answer.

"I see. But I'm afraid you're not! However, there is no need to worry if you don't like being abnormal. You can't stay that way for very long. Eventually, people like you either get rejected by society or adapt to it and lose their abnormality. Don't worry! You definitely fall in the latter category." He says all this without losing his smile.

"And that is why—you are truly ill-fated," he says with delight. "What I mean is that you have learned that loopholes exist. Every time you deal with misfortune you will wish that you had a box. No matter how much you'll struggle in order to forget about them, the boxes *do* exist. The boxes that grant any wish *do* exist. You won't ever be able to forget about the existence of that loophole. And eventually, when you've been living with that knowledge for long enough, a time will definitely come when you'll need a box!"

He is still smiling.

Aah, I see—

I handed back the box. But it was futile to do so. By then I was already bound by the curse of O.

"At the point in time when you'll need the box, you might have already lost your abnormality. If so, you won't be able to master the box anymore. That will reduce my interest in you a little. Therefore, I'm going to continue interfering with you and your surroundings from now on—to arouse your interest in a box."

What should I have done to avoid getting cursed?

—There was probably no way to prevent it.

I—no, *we* had already lost the very moment we first encountered O.

"Naturally, I'll provide you with a box even if you lose your abnormality. I don't mind—as long as you let me listen to your sound."

"...My sound?"

"Yes, I like any tonal color you humans produce, but there is a sound I like best. If possible, I'd like you to let me listen to that sound. ...Mh? What sound is it, you ask? My taste is completely ordinary, so I think you know already. It's—"

He smiles and says,

"—the sound of creaking hearts."

With these words the O who looks like Haruaki Usui disappears.

A small box falls to the ground where O was standing. When I reach out for it, it starts to expand.

Immediately afterwards, the entire scenery around us starts to get folded up. I can see the walls of this world. The white wallpaper starts to crumble to dust. The sweetness that has stuck to my skin disappears, leaving behind dull discomfort. My inner ears start to go crazy and everything starts to rotate. The sound of destruction. The sound of destruction. The sound of someone's destruction. This place is filled with despair. Undeniable despair.

The fake background has been erased and we are standing inside a dark chamber. A small, small chamber that would surely sicken me within just half a day.

This is probably—the inside of the box.

And in this prison-like room, she is crouched. With her forehead pressed to her knees and her arms around her legs.

This is the girl I loved.

".....Mogi...san."

Upon hearing my words, she slowly raises her face.

"Ah—"

Her eyes seemed almost dead until just now, but a faint light flares up in them.

"I can't believe it! There's no way everything could go that well for me!"

Tears flow down her cheeks.

At first I'm very confused, but I quickly understand why.

"—You really came to save me."

I see.

She's finally able to cry again.

"Mogi-san, I'm sorry. But I plan to destroy the Rejecting Classroom."

"...Yeah."

Mogi-san nods as she cries.

"I plan to let you die in the accident."

".....Yeah."

She wipes away her tears.

"You may destroy the box. You may also end my life. But please wait a moment. There's something I want to tell you."

Mogi-san starts to search for something in her bag. She takes it out and hides it behind her back.

Maria frowns at Mogi-san's behavior.

"Mogi...not again..."

Mogi-san ignores Maria and approaches me, hiding her hands behind her back.

"...Wait, Mogi! Please stop this alrea—"

"That's not it, Maria," I admonish her. I can't see what Mogi-san is hiding. But I already know what it is.

Maria reacts to my words with a dubious expression and steps behind Mogi-san. When she recognizes the object in her hands, she smiles wryly in amazement.

"Kazu-kun, do you think there are unchanging feelings?" Mogi-san asks me. I know what to say right away, but it won't be a pleasant answer for her.

Thus, I have quite some trouble saying it.

I guess my answer would be different if I hadn't experienced the Rejecting Classroom. But I have experienced it. I have experienced the world that resembles eternity. So I can't help thinking what I do. Unchanging feelings—

"—I don't think they exist."

Mogi-san patiently listens to my answer.

Then she smiles.

"Yeah, I agree."

I peer into her eyes without thinking. She seems to have already predicted this reaction, so she keeps smiling and continues.

"My feelings for you didn't stay the same at all. You stopped being dear to me. I started disliking you, I hated you, I considered you a hindrance. I was even about to kill you once. But you know? That means that I was depending on you all this time. Because I always believed that you would rescue me. Always, always... I couldn't ignore you. I know that it's the worst

and most selfish feeling there is. But you know? I couldn't help it. Even while I knew that I was being selfish. I know what this feeling is called. Even if you don't believe in unchanging feelings, please believe this. During all the time I've spent in the Rejecting Classroom—"

Mogi-san embraces me very reservedly.

And gives me the object she has been hiding.

Her lips tremble right beside my ear.

"—I loved you, Kazu-kun."

Her lips approach mine. Just as they are about to touch, she stops. After holding this position for a while, she peacefully pulls away without ever touching my lips.

I almost ask why she stopped, but I reconsider because she hands something to me.

"Ah—"

In my hands is the reason she couldn't do anything.

I understand and chew on my lip.

It's not what I expected her to give me.

It is an Umaibō.

So far so good, but it's not my favorite flavor, Corn Potage. It is Teriyaki Burger flavored. The flavor I don't like that much. Furthermore—

—it's the flavor that Mogi-san was originally supposed to give to me.

Why did Mogi-san embrace me so reservedly? Why didn't she kiss me?

This wasn't the confession of the Kasumi Mogi who has already confessed to me a countless number of times, who has already kissed me and has experienced the Rejecting Classroom.

It was the first confession of the Kasumi Mogi who existed before the Rejecting Classroom, who could only call me 'Hoshino-kun'.

I want to redo March 2nd.

The deepest regret she held on that day

She set it right just now.

So—do I have to answer as if it were the real March 2nd...?

I look at Mogi-san.

Mogi-san is smiling gently. She is waiting with a gentle smile, although she knows how I'll answer already.

"That's—"

That's just too cruel!

I don't want to say such a thing.

I mean, I loved Mogi-san. Even if these feelings were controlled by O, the feelings themselves weren't fake.

Why do I have no choice but to speak the words that will injure her?

Aah, of course.

I 'rejected' this box. I denied Mogi-san's wish. I'm going to let her die in an accident. I don't have the right to say kind words to her.

I open my mouth.

Still, it is quite hard to say it. I hesitate, opening and closing my mouth numerous times, and I'm startled by a salty liquid taste in my mouth.

But I can't think of any other words to say to her.

"Please wait until tomorrow."

Mogi-san sorrowfully casts her eyes downward.

She was definitely hurt by my words. And yet, her expression instantly changes once again. She tells me,

"Thank you."

—with a smile.

With a smile from the bottom of her heart.

Aah—

That smile lets me finally remember a conversation from long ago.

The conversation that made me fall in love with her.

The conversation that was the trigger for this ephemeral love.

A dear memory.

"Hoshino-kun. Could I ask you to call me Kasumi...?"

"Eh? W-Why, all of a sudden?"

"It may seem sudden to you, but I've wanted you to address me like this all this time, you know?"

"I...see."

"So...is it okay?"

"O-Okay..."

"A-Also, um—can I call you Kazu-kun?"

"Err... yeah, I don't mind."

"O-Okay, so please give it a try."

".....Kasumi."

"...Please say it once more."

"Kasumi."

"...Thank you."

"Wha...! W-Why are you crying...?!"

"Hm? Am I crying?"

"Y-You are...!"

"Then...it's because I'm so happy, Kazu-kun."

And then Kasumi laughed, even while tears poured from her eyes.

I had never seen a smile like that before.

It was a smile that was full of pure happiness.

It was the first time I was able to bring so much happiness to someone. It was a very novel sensation, so I felt extremely happy.

To bring happiness to someone is happiness itself.

I was happy to have discovered that side of me, and the girl who taught me this feeling became a special existence to me.

Maybe I'm simple-minded.

But without a doubt, that smile managed to change me.

But I'm going to erase this recollection.

I'm going to erase this newfound feeling.

I think that's just too cruel. I think there was no need to encounter such an

obstacle at the very last moment. I think it's heartless to make me destroy such a thing with my own hands.

But even so, I have already chosen.

I already chose a long time ago.

I mean, even this remorse will get erased by the Rejecting Classroom right away, won't it?

"Maria, can you grant a request?"

So I just want someone to give me a little push while I'm hesitating.

"Tell me."

"You should know what I'm going to do now."

"Yeah, because I've observed you more than anyone else in the world."

"What am I going to do now? I just want you to tell me."

Maria nods with a serious expression. No doubt, she knows exactly why I'm asking for this.

"You're going to trample it!"

But Maria doesn't mince her words.

"You're going to trample someone else's clumsy wish for the sake of your own wish! It's the one thing you won't abandon under any circumstances, Kazuki."

Yeah. I believe that I am right.

"Therefore, you will—destroy the box."

I nod at Maria's words.

I use my entire left arm to swipe away my tears.

"You're right."

I stand in front of the wall.

The gray wall surrounding us is thin, as if it were made of paper.

This box has no power anymore. It's merely enclosing my memories and keeping them from disappearing for just a little while longer.

I want to turn around and check on Kasumi's expression.

But I feel like I mustn't do that.

I hold my right hand aloft.

In order to destroy the box, Kasumi's wish and my own memories.

"Thank you. So in the end it really was you who rescued me, Kazu-kun."

Please stop!

You don't have any reason to thank me. I am only a destroyer. I'm only trampling your mistaken wish.

Sorry.

Please forgive me for not being able to save you.

So I ignore her voice.

But, thank you.

Because you smiled at the end, I can finally believe in myself.

"UAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

I scream at the top of my lungs and smash the wall as powerfully as possibly.

With a loud noise, the wall breaks easily, like glass.

I can see myself and Kasumi within one of the scattered pieces. We are happily smiling at each other.

That piece falls to the ground, breaks, and crumbles to dust.

White light starts to shine in from outside. The more the wall crumbles, the more the darkness is corroded by the light. Everything gets painted over and disappears except for us.

It is bright; I can't see anything.

But oh-so-cruelly, Kasumi is present. The original Kasumi is clearly present.

Kasumi is lying on the street, limbs askew. She's stained with blood. It looks so painful that I want to avert my eyes.

But Kasumi is smiling. She is smiling with all her might for me.

Her mouth opens.

"Goodbye."

And then we are enfolded in pure white and disappear.

The white light enters my body. The light searches for gaps and violently encroaches upon them, painting my insides, my blood, my heart and my brain white. The white light even invades my memory and paints it white.

Whether it's my fake yet valuable memories, the feelings I have experienced, the words we just exchanged—

Everything gets erased and fades into white.
Everything gets erased and fades into white.
Everything gets erased and fades into white—



1st time

"I am Aya Otonashi. I'm pleased to meet you," says the transfer student with a faint smile.

Astonished by her amazing looks, the girls start to chat noisily while the boys are left completely bereft of speech.

Of course I'm no exception. I don't think I've ever seen anyone as attractive as she is before. I couldn't avert my eyes even if I wanted to. Our eyes meet. I am instantly captivated by her eyes. The transfer student acts as though she is used to my reaction and smiles softly at me.

It almost makes me dizzy.

Falling in love with her is probably impossible. We are just too different. It's almost as if we live in different worlds. This may sound a bit mean, but I think anyone would agree after seeing her.

"I'd like to make a declaration," Aya Otonashi says without losing her perfect smile.

"Please—do not make friends with Aya Otonashi—with me."

The classroom sinks into silence at once.

This declaration is enough to silence our entire boisterous class like magic.

"Please do not take offense at my comment. If possible, I would love to make friends with everyone. However, that is not possible. Because—," she says in a firm, yet sorrowful voice, "—the existence of Aya Otonashi has to be an illusion."

I swallow even though I still have no clue what she's talking about.

"We are a poor match anyway. We are just ships passing in the night. Because I am the 'transfer student,' I am not acquainted with anyone, and no one is acquainted with me—and I will continuously return to this state. I will have to endure and maintain this relationship-less state for a long time. So I think it's accurate to call me a phantom. But even as a phantom I still have a sense of self. I feel sad about my state as well, but I have no choice but to accept it. Because as soon as I stop being able to accept being an illusion—as soon as I cannot endure it anymore—I am going to be taken in by this false recurrence."

I still don't get it at all. The only thing I understand is that she's dead serious and that no one is able to make fun of what she's saying.

"In order to become an illusion, I abandoned my real name inside this *box*. I fear that if I use my real name, I will become my own burden. And if I get taken in by this false recurrence, you will most likely all be erased."

She continues with a steady voice.

"Therefore, I—have to remain an illusion by becoming Aya Otonashi."

I see. I don't know what that means, but she isn't 'Aya Otonashi' yet.

She is going to become 'Aya Otonashi.'

She probably doesn't want to. It's not what she wishes for.

Still, she has no choice but to become 'Aya Otonashi.'

"But I am not strong," she says bitterly. "I suppose there will be times when I will want to complain. However once things get underway, I will stop being 'Aya Otonashi' as soon as I show any sign of weakness. Since this is my last chance, I will permit myself to display a bit of my weakness right now. I—"

It's by chance.

Yeah, I guess it's just by chance, but without a doubt—

—she is looking at me when she says:

"I—want someone to be by my side."

And then she smiles at me.

"Well then, please let me introduce myself once again," she says as if to convince herself.

"I am 'Aya Otonashi.' I hope we can be on good terms as we walk the long road that lies ahead for us."

Aya Otonashi bows very deeply.

Unsure of how to react, we all remain silent.

So, I start to applaud.

My clapping is the only sound that can be heard.

Finally someone joins in. Another person begins to applaud as well. The applause grows louder and louder.

When all of our classmates are applauding, she finally raises her head again.

But she's not smiling anymore.

Fists tightly clenched, she looks straight ahead with fiery willpower glowing in her eyes.



The weather is magnificent, and the sky is a deep blue.

As soon as I woke up, I confirmed today's date on my cell phone. 'April 7th.' Today's 'April 7th.' I also checked the newspaper and the TV to confirm that it's really 'April 7th.' Of course I realize that I'm being irrational, but ever since I was trapped within the Rejecting Classroom, I get very anxious if I don't go through all these rituals.

I retained the events of the Rejecting Classroom in my memories. However, my ability to recall those memories is imperfect – it feels like I'm looking at pictures of a place that I've never seen or visited. The *box*, Maria, O—I know what they are. But the corresponding emotions are not there anymore. No anger, no sadness—nothing at all. So even if I'd been in love with someone, I'd probably have forgotten about it by now. Maybe I'll gradually forget those memories because they were so faint to begin with.

Including Maria.

I mean, we weren't supposed to meet to begin with, so I'm sure we won't meet again.

Anyhow, today's 'April 7th,' the day of the opening ceremony.

I've become a second year student.

My classroom is now on the 4th floor instead of the 3rd floor. The scenery hasn't improved just because I'm on a different floor, and located more to the west. Nevertheless, the air feels completely different as I enter the room of class 2-3. I'm so excited that I even press my hand to my chest.

After checking the seating chart placed on the teacher's desk, I sit down in my new seat. When I lightly greet my new classmates with a 'Let's all get along,' their replies are lively. Yeah, I'm getting some good vibes.

Another person enters the classroom.

He sees me and raises his hand.

"Heyho, Hoshii! So we're in the same class again!"

Even though his comment is totally generic, the other fifteen people in the room focus their attention on us. Yeah, Haruaki is as loud as ever.

"...Haruaki."

"Mh, what's the matter?"

I look at him with suspicion.

"Are you the real Haruaki?"

"...why, do I look like a fake? Did you perhaps think I'm my own twin? Were you influenced by that super famous manga ^[1]so now you think that all high-school baseball pitchers are twins?!"

"...no."

For some reason, I start to wonder if I can trust a single thing he says...

"Ah right, Hoshii! Come to think of it—"

"Morning, Haru and Kazu-kun!"

A new voice interrupts Haruaki.

Kokone is standing by the door of the classroom. Daiya is next to her.

Ah, did those two affectionately accompany each other to school today as well? If I mention that, Daiya will punish me with psychological harassment all day long, so I don't say anything.

"Getting greeted by a girl, my heart beat faster for a second—but man, it's just you, Kiri? What a waste of my excitement."

"Hey Haru... What's with that reaction? Who do you think you are?"

"Er, well, I'd just like you to stop being so obsessed with me that you'd chase after me just to be in the same class."

"Haa... so you try to hide how embarrassed you are because you're obsessed with me by using such phrasing? You wea~~lly are a child, Haru-chan, awen't you? Ah, right. Can you finally stop filling your mobile phone with my Moe voice?"

"Who would do such a thing!?"

"My Mastee~'... come on! Now's the chance to add some new data to the Haru Moe-Moe voice collection! Shall I give you one more chance? If you like, I can add a 'Welcome home~' this time?!"

What's with this conversation... Please stop it, it's embarrassing.

"Haa... hey Kazu, do you happen to have any firecrackers? I'd love to jam some in Kiri's mouth and set them off right now."

"And then what about you, Daiya? You're jealous that I provide my Moe Moe voice only to Haru? Don't worry! If you bow down and kiss my feet, I'll say 'Onii-chan' to you, you little-sister fetishist. Aren't I the best?!"

"How about a 'Sorry for being born?'"

...nothing at all has changed in the new classroom.

But this is what I wished for.

I feel a bit lonely without Maria and Mogi-san, but regaining this everyday life is the reason I fought the Rejecting Classroom.

"...why are you grinning to yourself? That's repulsive, Kazu!"

Daiya calls me out.

"Ah, really. Kazu-kun's grinning. How horny he must be. I bet he's imagining some girl sitting beside him, stumbling around clumsily—"

"I'm not."

I deny it immediately, causing Kokone to pucker her lips.

"But who's sitting there anyway? Do you know? Is it some cute girl?"

Haruaki asks me while shamelessly sitting on said seat. Since I checked out the names of the people sitting next to me back when I looked at the seating chart, I know whose seat it is.

"Yeah. It's a cute girl!"

"For real?! Who is it?!"

I'm glad she has a seat. Because she has a seat, the possibility of her sitting there also exists.

Her seat won't be next to mine anymore by the time she returns, but I don't mind.

With a smile, I declare the name of the girl sitting beside me:

"It's Mogi-san!"



I thought the rain would never stop on that day.

I headed to the hospital right after Daiya told me about Mogi-san's accident, and took a day off from school. I had to take a taxi since her hospital was outside the city. This was extraordinary behavior for me, given the priority I place upon a peaceful life.

But I had to do it. Since I fought against the Rejecting Classroom, I had to know the outcome.

No one beat me to the hospital, not even her family. After being mistaken for her lover, I waited together with her family while she was being operated on.

The operation succeeded... it seemed. But Mogi-san didn't regain consciousness that day.

Since I'd been barred from the ICU, I was finally able to see her two days later. By then, she'd been moved to the general ward.

Mogi-san lay on her bed, looking quite pitiful. The sounds of the electrocardiogram and artificial respiration made my eardrums vibrate. Her feet and arms were pinned in place, her face was covered with bruises and the IV drip had turned one of her arms violet.

Seeing the lonesome and wounded body of someone I knew in a hospital almost made me cry. But I knew I wasn't the only one who wanted to cry. I wasn't allowed to cry in front of her. I held back my tears and looked at her face, staring for just a little bit.

Mogi-san seemed a bit surprised when she saw me. I'm not too sure, though, since she didn't move her facial muscles.

Her family had told me that she had regained consciousness, but due to shock, she hadn't spoken a single word yet.

But Mogi-san opened her mouth and tried to tell me something with all her might. I told her not to strain herself, but she ignored me and tried to speak anyway.

Mogi-san darkened her oxygen mask with her breath, and directed her first words at me.

"—I'm so glad. I survived."

I couldn't understand her that well, but that's what it sounded like she was saying.

Mogi-san burst into tears after saying just that. I had no idea what to do, so I let my gaze wander. Beside the bed lay her dirty bag, and I saw something silver inside it. I knew what it was, and instinctively picked up the silver-wrapped object. It was a Teriyaki Burger flavored Umaibō, crumbled and no longer pristine. As I kept thoughtlessly touching it, I suddenly couldn't hold out any longer and burst into tears.

I didn't know why I started crying at that point. I remember that she gave me that Umaibō in the other world, but I couldn't recall why she did it.

But my tears were real.

I visited her hospital room in the general ward several times after that. Mogi-san tried to act as cheerful as possible when we talked.

"While I was unconscious, I had a long dream," Mogi-san told me one time. Apparently she believed it was all a dream.

A thought suddenly crossed my mind. Mogi-san couldn't escape the fate of getting run over by a truck in that world. And her repeated survival each time didn't change either. That might have been why the Rejecting Classroom remained intact, no matter how many times she was run over.

Though she survived, she was paralyzed from the waist down. A blow to her back had damaged her spinal cord, so the likelihood of a full recovery was not just hopeless, it was actually impossible.

I had no idea how to respond, so I just stayed silent. To bridge the uneasy silence, Mogi-san said:

"I always believed that in a situation like this, I'd be better off dead. You understand why, don't you, Hoshino-kun? I won't be able to walk on my own two legs anymore, and even something as basic as buying a little dessert at the convenience store next door won't be a carefree decision for me anymore. I can only do it if I depend on someone else or if I take my wheelchair. All kinds of hardship just to buy a dessert! Isn't that cruel? But it's kind of strange. I don't think of suicide at all. I wonder why? I think, really, from the bottom of my heart—"

—that I'm glad to be alive.

Mogi-san said this without the tiniest hint that she was bluffing or lying.

"So I'm alright. I won't quit school either. No matter how much time it takes, I will recover. Maybe I won't attend the same school as you guys anymore, but I won't give up."

She smiled and weakly flashed her biceps at me.

It's embarrassing to admit, but at that point I burst into tears in front of her. I was glad. Glad that her most important wish was granted.

—can I do something for you?

I asked her that with complete sincerity, because I wanted to help her as much as possible.

Mogi-san started off with, "I'm very happy that you offered" and bashfully continued,

"I want you to save a place for me to return to. I want you to build a place for me to exist once more."

—Once more? Did I ever build a place for you?

".....within that long dream of mine you did."

After that response, Mogi-san averted her eyes for some reason.



I'm at the entrance ceremony in the gym.

Something comes to mind as Haruaki sighs and moans during the principal's ceremonial address.

"By the way, Haruaki, weren't you about to tell me something this morning?"

"Mh? ...aah, right! Right! I've heard some rumors that there's a super cute girl among the new students!"

Haruaki smacks my shoulders and winks at me.

"Well, then I don't care. As her senior I won't have any reason to talk to her anyway."

"Are you an idiot?! Just being able to watch a cute girl is already happiness itself!"

I don't want to believe that this is how the common man thinks.

"But when did you hear this rumor? Today's the first time we're going to see the new first years, right?"

"Will wonders never cease! It's Daiyan's information!"

"Daiya's?"

I can't really believe Haruaki. I've never heard Daiya talk about girls that way.

"You don't believe me, do you? But there's a reason Daiyan knows! You know that he only made two mistakes on the entire entrance examination, right?"

"Yeah. He's always boasting that he set the school record."

"That record was beaten after just one year!" Haruaki says with great glee. He's hopeless...but I can understand his amusement.

"Err? What does this have to do with Daiya knowing about this cute girl?"

"You're really really slow, Hoshii. I'm saying that this cute girl has beaten his record by getting a perfect score in all subjects. Some teacher told Daiyan about this, since Daiyan was the previous record holder. The teacher

also said, she was so beautiful that even as an adult, he felt flustered in her presence."

That's just exaggeration. Why would he feel flustered when he obviously has so much more life experience than any high school student?

The principal's ceremonial address ended while we were talking.

The chairman turns on his microphone.

"Thank you very much, principal. ...let's proceed with the freshmen representative's speech—"

"Finally—a chance to see that hot chick everyone's been talking about!"

I see. Since she's the top student, she's the freshman chosen to speak.

Even I'm starting to develop some interest, so I start looking around.

"The representative of the freshmen—Maria Otonashi."

Maria—Otonashi?

A name that seems extremely familiar to me. ...no, no. That can't be. Maria was called Aya Otonashi, after all.

"Yes."

But this voice is definitely hers. It's Maria's voice.

Aah, I see. I finally got it.

'If you've forgotten, remember it now. My name's 'Maria.

Hah. So she was just telling the truth back then.

...oh? So I was calling Maria all this time by her first name...? UWAA!
UWAAAAAA!

"...why are you getting all red, Hoshii?"

She mounts the platform more elegantly than anyone else. Having lived longer than anyone else here, she already possesses enormous presence.

The very sight of her causes everyone to start murmuring.

A face I know very well. The face that's been beside me for the longest time.

She's wearing a brand new uniform.

Yeah, that's just plain wrong—I never thought she'd be younger than me.

While standing at the platform, Maria lets her gaze wander around. Her eyes meet mine. And her wandering gaze stops on me for some reason.

Then she smiles.

My body is instantly and completely paralyzed.

Maria begins her speech without releasing me from her gaze. Even the noisiest students quiet down upon hearing her imposing voice.

"Isn't she staring over here? Oh shit, maybe she fell for me?"

Haruaki cracks jokes, but I am so absorbed by Maria's gaze that I can't even respond.

I am only looking at Maria.

Maria is only looking at me.

"—and so, I conclude the freshmen's speech. This was the representative of the freshmen speaking, Maria Otonashi."

Maria steps down from the platform.

And right as she does so, the students start getting noisy again. No, not only the students—even the teachers are in a tizzy.

But I am, without a doubt, the most confused person in the room.

Because Maria doesn't return to her original place, and instead heads straight toward me.

The students automatically get out of her way, repelled by her aura of authority. Maria takes full advantage and makes a beeline for me.

She's creating a direct path between us.

Aah, geez. Has she still failed to shed her habits from that other world? It might be okay to act without reservation there, but the real world doesn't work like that, does it?

I already realize that my everyday life is about to be destroyed.

"Haha—"

But I laugh, nonetheless.

It's really bothersome.

It's really bothersome, but no... it somehow doesn't feel that bothersome.

At last, the students in front of me move aside. Haruaki also moves away from me. Maria and I are surrounded by empty space, as if we're in the eye of a hurricane.

In the middle of that wide, gaping space, she stands directly in front of me.

I thought we'd never meet again.

But on second thought, there's no way she wouldn't join me.

After all, it's her goal to obtain a box. She has no choice but to approach me, the one who O has targeted.

Maria smiles, and starts to speak.

"I'm always by your side no matter how much time passes—that's how I declared war on you, once upon a time, but it seems that our war hasn't ended yet."

After making her speech, she introduces herself once more.

"I am 'Maria Otonashi.' I'm pleased to meet you."

The freshman girl bows very deeply, just as she did long ago.

In response, I applaud, just as I did long ago.

For a few moments, my clapping is the only sound in the gymnasium.

Then Haruaki starts to applaud without understanding the situation at all. Drawn in by his applause, someone else starts clapping. Although Maria and I are the only ones who understand what just happened, the applause grows louder and louder.

In the midst of this magnificent applause, Maria raises her head.

But she's not smiling anymore.

Fists tightly clenched, she stands before me with fiery willpower glowing in her eyes.

Author's Notes

Hello, I am Eiji Mikage.

It has been nearly three years since my previous work was published. If there are any readers anticipating my new book, I beg their pardon. And also, thanks for not forgetting about me.

There was a period during which I came to a halt, but it's not like I gave up on writing. The reason that I didn't publish a book in three years is simply my own lack of power.

I wrote this book with a stronger focus on entertainment value than before. My stance concerning my purpose for writing novels has changed as well.

But I couldn't help but get anxious about all this change. Won't the quality of my writing disappear? Won't my faithful readers feel betrayed? Will this book be buried under a pile of many other great books?

This was the anxiety—and fear—that I was fighting against at every turn while writing 'Utsuro no Hako to Zero no Maria'.

But before I knew it, this anxiety and fear had disappeared.

Because I noticed that this book is nothing more than my own book.

I believe that it has become a book that I'm able to say 'Try reading it' to: the readers who liked my previous works, the readers who didn't, and also the readers who didn't know me at all before.

How was it? Was it amusing, now that you've read it?

If the answer is 'YES,' then there's no greater delight for me.

By the way, this is my 4th book and also my first book with illustrations.

To be honest, I was worried at first that my readers' opinions would change due to the illustrations, but when I received a copy of a rough sketch, I changed my mind.

It was the sensation of my own characters no longer remaining my property alone.

It was the sensation of having my characters escape from my control.

This time, I didn't see how my characters were drawn until I was almost finished writing, so the influence was relatively small, but I'm going to lose this "independence of my characters" in my future works.

I'm eager to know what the outcome will be.

Also, I received support from lots of people while writing this book. To be clear, the weight of my gratitude is totally different this time around, because I finally realized how many parties are involved before a book like this can be published.

Therefore, my thank-you section is also going to be very long. I beg your pardon.

All the people on the editorial team of ASCII Media Arts. The proofreader. The designer. My thanks go out to all of you.

415-san who drew the illustrations for me. I was anxious about having illustrations at first, but as soon as I saw 415-san's illustrations, that anxiety got wiped away. My days have since been transformed—all day long, various delusions run through my head while I look at his illustrations with a grin on my face.

My friends who helped me develop myself, all my colleagues at my part time job.

My family, who watched over me when I had quite a few problems getting this book out.

Yuu Fujiwara-san. I'm really thankful that you encouraged me when I was about to rot because my manuscripts were getting rejected non-stop.

And of course Kawamoto-san, who's in charge of me. If it weren't for you, this book would never have existed. I'm amazed that you didn't abandon me, given how I used to behave—no joke. You helped me grow in so many ways, and not just in the literary realm. I'm really thankful. Best regards to you going forward as well.

And then of course I'd like to thank all of my readers who picked up this book.

Novels exist because there are readers who read them. All of you are part of this novel... which is a bit rude of me to say, but anyway, you are indispensable components.

I hope I conveyed my gratitude to everyone with at least a bit of originality.

I hope that we will continue to associate for a long time from now on if possible.

Ah, and sorry for writing such a boring afterword!

- Eiji Mikage



Comments

Eiji Mikage

I live in Saitama. My shoe size is 24.5cm. It's hard to find men's shoes in this size. When I went bowling with some friends the other day, my rental shoes were the only ones that had a Hello Kitty printed on them. Goddamn it.

415

I live peacefully in a corner of the Tokyo Metropolitan area with a mechanical pencil in my hand.

My room's always a mess with all the mangas and documents in here, so I have made it my goal this year to keep my room immaculate for more than a month.

Translator Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ Umaibō (うまい棒) or "delicious stick" is a small, puffed, cylindrical corn snack that resides at the bottom of most Japanese convenience store candy shelves
2. Jump up↑ a not-so-subtle reference to a folk remedy that involves the use of leeks (well, technically, spring onions) as a suppository in order to cure colds. http://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q1233508952
3. Jump up↑ If you're reading this light novel, chances are that you don't need this note. On the other hand, you may find the diversity of commentary on the subject interesting, especially as you scroll further down the page. See <http://ask.metafilter.com/161835/First-names-in-Japanese-honorifics>
4. Jump up↑ If you're reading this light novel, chances are that you don't need this note. On the other hand, you may find the diversity of commentary on the subject interesting, especially as you scroll further down. See <http://ask.metafilter.com/161835/First-names-in-Japanese-honorifics>
5. Jump up↑ Actually, Kasumi says "イタイ".

This can mean either "痛い" (It hurts) or "居たい" (Want to exist/live). Given the initial context, it would be natural to assume the former. But she later uses the Kanji, which clarifies the meaning.

6. Jump up↑ Most likely Touch by Mitsuru Adachi [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touch_\(manga\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touch_(manga))
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